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PICTURES OF COTTAGE LIFE.

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IN THE

WEST OF ENGLAND.

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BY

MARGARET E. POOLE.

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PREFACE.

THE following stories have been written in illustration of various characteristic traits and incidents, traditions and superstitions, belonging to the West of England, and more especially to Somersetshire.

Some of them relate to present, or, at any rate, to recent times, others to past days and customs long gone by; but, in every case, each tale is founded upon some story of actual life, although plot and characters are alike fictitious, and the scenes are laid in imaginary places.

It is not without diffidence that they are offered to the public. We are well aware how difficult it is to portray truly habits of life and modes of thought which we have never actually shared, and have only had the opportunity of observing by glimpses and from the outside. The recollection, however, that one nature is common to us all, and that we are but trying to note how that develops itself under

varying conditions of place and circumstance, gives us confidence to hope that, sensible as we are of many shortcomings, we have not altogether failed to make our "Pictures" life-like.

We must add a few words respecting the dialect made use of in these stories. We could not bring ourselves to barbarize our page by framing our orthography upon the model of those phrase-books which profess to teach travellers how to pronounce a foreign language, by phonetic spelling. Where a letter is left out in speaking we have omitted it, and supplied its place with an apostrophe; but we have, almost always, refrained from making those alterations which, when written, look so uncouth as to be repellent to most readers, such as putting *z* for *s*, devising combinations to express the sound of the vowels, or doubling letters to convey that peculiar prolongation of the voice by which monosyllables are often converted into dissyllables.

This does not by any means involve a sacrifice of all that is individual and characteristic. On the contrary, it is our opinion that idioms are, in reality, more distinctive than pronunciation; and the dialect which is spoken in Somerset, and, with but little variation, in Dorset likewise, is characterized by idioms which are

highly individual and peculiar, and which we have taken great pains to preserve. Such as, for example, the invariable use of the auxiliary verb *do* in forming the present and the imperfect of the indicative; the accumulated negations; and the curious habit of repeating the point of the sentence in an inverted form at the end of it, with a strong emphasis on the nominative case, so that the following expression, "I know nothing at all about it," would expand into "I don't know nothin' at all about it, not *I* don't." The genitive case after the present participle, and the use of "I be," "thou be'st," "he be," &c., instead of "I am," "thou art," "he is," are similar instances of grammatical peculiarities, which are not merely common, but general, even in the present day, when all that is distinctive is so rapidly disappearing, as if at the irresistible touch of some potent spell.

Yet, just as the ancient superstitions recorded in some of these stories have little hold upon the present generation, and are scarcely so much discredited as forgotten, so it is equally unmistakeable that local peculiarities of speech are being forgotten too, and are daily becoming less obvious, especially in towns, so that it is often quite striking how differently a grandfather and a grandchild will speak. The old present

of the indicative, "I do zee" (it would be more correct to write "*I dozee;*" for the auxiliary and the verb are pronounced as one word, the accent falling on the latter) is transformed by those whose mothers have lived as domestic servants in gentlemen's families, and who themselves are being educated at the National School, into "I do see," "I sees," and "I see;" and a mixed style of talking prevails, whilst the dialect once common to all, with its thoroughly characteristic accents and inflections, is seldom heard in its genuine individuality except from the lips of quite elderly persons.

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PICTURES OF COTTAGE LIFE.

OTHER FOLKS' CHILDREN.

PART I.

"There is no fold, however watched and tended,
But one dead lamb is there;
There is no fireside, howsoe'er defended,
But has one vacant chair.
The air is full of wailings for the dying,
And mournings for the dead;
The heart of Rachel, for her children crying,
Will not be comforted."

LONGFELLOW.

IT was five o'clock in the afternoon on a short December day. Already the lamps were being lighted in the principal streets of the little seaport town of Westbridge; shutters were being closed, and candles called for, in the sober-looking mansions of Gloucester Square, the centre of local fashion and respectability; and in most of the shop-windows in Bridge Street the flaring gas-lights had begun, one by one, to make their appearance.

Twilight had set in unusually early that day. The morning had been grey and lowering;—and, at the turn of the tide in the afternoon, the rain came in the shape of a drizzling mist, which seemed to blot out the sky, and render every object indistinct.

It was a day that made everything look dismal and dirty, even where the streets were the best built, and the pavement the widest. How much more was this the case in the crowded courts and alleys near the quay, where the sailor-folk dwelt. One of the largest of these courts was named Spring Buildings. It was a great ill-paved square, with a cottage of larger size than the rest, and a block of pig-sties in the centre. The entrance was a narrow archway, with a public-house on one side, and an untidy-looking shop on the other. The cottages in Spring Buildings were very old, and very badly constructed; yet partly on account of their near neighbourhood to the water-side, partly from mere habit of association, they were in great request among the seafaring population, and actually commanded a higher rent than far better cottages in any other part of the town.

On fine days, even in winter, the inhabitants of Spring Buildings were very much in the habit of living with open doors. Children of all ages played on the pavement: the big ones, boys as well as girls, nursing babies, and minding the little ones; mothers stood at the wash-tub just within their doorways, or hung out clothes to dry in long festoons right across to the opposite houses; and girls sat on the door-steps, glovemaking or shoebinding. On this December

afternoon, however, the rain had driven everyone indoors, except three dirty urchins from a neighbouring alley, who played at marbles under the shelter of the pig-sties, and flattered themselves that not even their mothers would guess their retreat.

As it grew dusk, a ruddy gleam of firelight lit up most of the cottage windows, and the women and children within gathered to their early tea. But in one house, not far from the entrance on the right-hand side, all was darkness; and beside the cold ashes of the dead fire a woman sat with neglected dress and untended person, rocking herself to and fro, utterly regardless of the chill disorder of her room, and only half-conscious that she herself was sick and faint with long fasting.

She was a young mother, poor thing, and her baby had been buried that morning; and she sat alone in her grief, for her husband was away at sea, and knew nothing of it. The little one had been quite well when he sailed, ten days ago; and now he must return to find an empty cradle and a sorrow-stricken wife.

Several times since the baby died, poor Ruth Stevens had thought with dread of her husband's return, and shuddered to think that when he asked for his child she could only show him a little grave. He had been so fond of the child—so proud of it—how would he bear to hear that it was dead? But now, sitting in the cold, bowed down with grief, worn out with the efforts she had made to find means to bury the child decently, Ruth was not thinking

of her husband; she was not even weeping for her child, for her eyes were dry and tearless: she was merely longing for it; suffering a very agony of longing to feel her child in her arms, to press her lips to its soft cheek, to lavish on it in a thousand ways, such as all mothers know, some of the overflowing love that possessed her heart. That love, once the delight of her life, was now her torment; it had become a hungry yearning which consumed her very soul.

"But I 'ont cry for her no more," she moaned to herself; "I 'ont cry no more for my darlin'. I see her last night so soon as ever I falled asleep for a minute —a lyin' in her little coffin, an' lookin' at me so strange an' reproachful-like. Seem like as though she did say to me, Don't 'ee keep me out of heaven wi' cryin' so after me[1]—don't 'ee, mother dear. I know I didn't ought to cry so after 'ee, my precious; but I don't know how to help it. I don't want to keep 'ee out o' heaven, my darlin'. I do want 'ee to be a dear blessed little angel. I know God can do for 'ee better nor I can; but, O my precious, my precious! I do want to do for 'ee myself. But there, I 'ont shed another tear. I do love 'ee too well to keep cryin' after 'ee. I 'ont do it—not if it do break my heart to keep it in."

And so the poor bereaved mother went on mourning, till, while she sat all unconscious of outward things, there was a slipshod footfall on the pavement,

[1] There is a superstition that a mother's tears and yearnings have a power of *holding her child's soul back*, and preventing it from freely taking flight to heaven.

a rough hand lifted the latch of the door, and without any leave asked or given, a tall masculine woman entered the cottage.

"My, Ruth Stevens!" said a loud, coarse voice, "here you be all in the dark an' the cold. Whatever 'ould your man say, if he was to come in on a sudden? They do call un sober Bob, but" (here the intruder swore a frightful oath) "he do know the way to the 'Royal George' well enough to find it, or I'm" (never mind how much) "mistaken."

The sad mourner by the fire-side raised her head, and beheld, with a dim sensation of wonder and dislike, the dark figure that filled her doorway. The loud voice and coarse language were not new to her. She recognized both as the property of a disreputable virago, whose brawling tongue and unabashed impudence were amongst the pests of the neighbourhood. It was not often that this woman's step crossed any decent threshold, and Ruth, in the midst of her sorrow, felt half angry at the insult of her presence, half frightened at the recollection of the well-known violence of her character, with which she felt quite unable to cope.

But Susannah Bird seemed to be that day in a gentler mood than usual.

"Tell 'ee what," she said, "I be goin' to make up a bit o' fire. 'Tis perishin' cold, sure-ly."

With these words she advanced unceremoniously into the room; and Ruth, catching the dim outline of her figure in the dusk, noticed that she carried in her arms, carelessly and uncomfortably enough,

a little infant, whose small bare head hung over her shoulder.

"There, take hold," she cried, roughly swinging the child down from its position, and placing it with a sudden jerk in Ruth's arms.

Ruth was silent from utter astonishment.

"I can't find nothin' here," continued her visitor: "I'll just fetch a light, an' bring t'other child over wi' me."

"Re'lly, Mrs. Bird, I don't want nothin'—an' I wish you'd take your baby, an' leave me to myself. I don't mean no offence, but I'm very full o' trouble—an', astin' your pardon, I'm wishful to be alone."

Already Ruth had dismissed more than one kindly neighbour with this sort of speech; but Susannah Bird took it very composedly.

"You be a fool to fret so after a baby. 'Tis very like you'll know what 'tis to have too many of 'em afore you've been many years married. Any way, it 'ont do no good to sit perishin' wi' cold an' want o' victuals. So just you hold the child a minute, an' I'll be back directly."

She was gone before Ruth could stop her; and there on her knees lay the little live infant, in the place of her own dead child, making a low fretful wail, which Ruth could no more disregard than she could forget that she had been a mother. She took it up in her arms and hushed and fondled it, as though she were resuming in a dream the old habit of tender nursing which cruel death had broken off. Somehow, when the sad little wail was stilled, and the child lay

soft and happy in her arms, a drop of comfort seemed to reach her soul for the first time since her own baby died.

Then Susannah Bird came back. She held in one hand a flaring tallow candle, and dragged after her by the other a pale-faced boy, a little over three years old. The instant she let go of his hand he crept away into the nearest corner, as though possessed by some unchildlike instinct to shrink into the dark to be out of sight. Susannah threw open the door of Ruth's coal-cupboard, and explored its emptiness with her candle.

"I reckon the funeral have drove 'ee up pretty short, Ruth," she said, with a laugh. "Howsomever, there be enough left to make a fire." And, deaf to remonstrance, she proceeded to light one, having found a brass candlestick in which to place the candle she had brought in her naked hand.

"Now, what victuals have 'ee had to-day?"

Ruth was beginning to submit to her visitor's rough kindness without questioning it. She nodded towards the mantel-shelf, on which stood a plate containing something green.

"What! chopped onion-stalks?" cried Susannah, recognizing the untempting morsel at once.

"They be very nourishin'," Ruth replied apologetically, "when you can't get nothin' else."

"Well, I never! To think o' *you* bein' brought to that. You did ought to have some tay.—Tommy, you bad boy, sit still till I do come back, or I'll give it 'ee."

With this threat, addressed to the invisible child in the dark corner, she again disappeared, and soon came back carrying a steaming teapot and a piece of bread. Hunger and thirst, which sorrow had laid to sleep, awakened at the sight of food. Ruth did not refuse to eat and drink what was set before her; and although it was but a piece of dry bread and a cup of hot tea-leaves and water, hardly deserving the name of tea, it revived her, and she felt grateful for it. Then Susannah Bird drew another chair to the three-legged table, and placing her elbows upon it, and resting her chin on her hands, began to tell her errand.

"I've got a place," she began, with a disagreeable side-glance out of the corner of her eye to see how Ruth would receive the improbable statement.

"Ay, have you?" assented Ruth absently, whilst she gently rocked herself to and fro to lull the infant in her arms.

"'Tis just that," continued Susannah Bird, with an odd kind of laugh; "Dr. Taylor have give me a recommend to go out as nurse. 'Tis very good pay. But, says I to myself, whatever will I do with the childr'n? plague 'em! So after a bit I thinks, I'll just take an' put 'em out; an' there's Ruth Stevens have lost her baby, an' might do with 'em very well. So there, I've took an' brought 'em. An' here's ten shillin' for the first fortnight. I couldn' afford to give more'n five shillin' a week for the two."

"But——" began poor Ruth, amazed and taken by surprise.

"Now don't 'ee say you 'ont have 'em," said Susan-

nah, "'cause they'll be such company to 'ee. You've took to the baby already, an' the baby have took to you."

"But," said poor bewildered Ruth, "whatever 'd my master say? I couldn' do it, nohow."

"Law bless 'ee, your man 'll never cut up rough 'cause o' your tryin' to turn a penny when he's away, an' you drove up so short."

Ruth reflected for a moment. That half-sovereign would indeed enable her to meet more than one pressing call for money. She looked round her room, and two thoughts smote upon her heart at once: the thought of the desolateness that reigned in her house, and the thought of her husband's return, now possible at any moment. What would he say if he found blank discomfort, as well as sorrow, in his home?

Was there anything else that prudence could urge in favour of keeping the children? Alas, no! Ruth knew that, in truth, prudence could produce nothing but arguments in favour of sending them away. She knew that her husband would blame her for receiving them: she knew that she could get the necessaries of life on credit till his return: she knew that Susannah Bird was a disreputable woman, and was probably, in some way or other, imposing on her. And yet she could not bear to say no. She could not bear to give back the little weak creature that lay on her knees, looking so piteously neglected and uncared for, to the tender mercies of its own mother.

She did not say anything, but Susannah rightly interpreted her silence.

"I do see you do mean to keep 'em," said she, "so that there piece o' work's done. Childr'n is plagues, for sure, from the first word to the last. I do wish mine was dead."

But as the cruel wish passed her lips, something that would have been a soft expression, perhaps, on a less hardened countenance, crossed her face. She stooped down, and looked earnestly at her infant.

"You sets yourself up for bein' a good woman," she said to Ruth, rather fiercely. "Just you remember *I* never hadn't a chance!" Then, after a pause, "I believes you *be* a good woman, and" (with an oath) "I be glad of it."

The next moment she was gone.

"An' never so much as give one kiss to her precious darlin' baby!" cried Ruth. And she caught the child up in her arms, and kissed it passionately herself. And with that her heart grew warm, and the sorrow that had lain on it all day like a piece of ice, melted, and she gave way to a flood of tears—soft tears, tears that did her good; instead of the fiery drops that had coursed down her cheeks in the morning, bringing little relief to her agony, quenching not at all the "fire in her heart and fire in her brain."

And whilst she wept over the infant in her arms, the other child, that had hidden himself in the dark corner, took courage and crept forth. In his precocious little mind he settled that the woman crying by the fire-side must have been beaten. Baby was crying too, which was a terrible thing: supposing the woman should leave off crying, and get angry, whatever would

become of Baby? Supposing Baby was to be shook, and laid down, and he and Baby left by themselves in this strange place, which he wasn't accustomed to, and did not know the ins and outs of?

He half shrank back into his hiding-place, but as Ruth only checked her own weeping a little to soothe the baby, and then wept on, pity gained the day in his childish heart, and he made his way cautiously to her side, and got hold of a hand that was within reach, and gently stroked it, saying, "Poor, poor." And then the general atmosphere of grief became too much for him, and he burst into a loud sympathetic roar.

Ruth had to leave off crying altogether, and attend to the two small creatures she had taken charge of. They wanted to be "done for" immediately in countless ways. First and foremost they obviously wanted washing; and then, no doubt, they both wanted something to eat; and then, of course, they wanted to be put to bed. Ruth started up, laid the baby in her own child's empty cradle, too busy to remember any sad associations at the moment, kissed the little boy, who kissed her in return, and said coaxingly, "Gi' Tommy a bit o' bread;" promised him that he should have his tea directly, and carried him off with her to the shop at the corner, to buy bread, and other needful things.

Ruth slept that night with the baby on her arm, and little Tommy nestling close beside her. It was the first healthful sleep she had enjoyed since the death of her own infant. In the morning some of the

neighbours did not fail to come in, and reason with her on her folly in taking in the children. They told her Susannah Bird was just the woman to make off, and leave her children on other people's hands. They laughed at Ruth for being so easily imposed upon as to believe such a transparent fiction as that Dr. Taylor would recommend such a woman as Susannah to a place. Ruth merely said, There, she supposed they was right; but now she'd got the children, she should keep them. And the neighbours said she was a foolish thing, and asked, What would her husband say? But foolish Ruth was wiser than they were, after all; though hers was unconscious wisdom, and she blamed herself all the while for being so foolish. For three days more her husband did not return. What would Ruth have done in the lonely grief-haunted house without those children? Verily to her they were "angels unawares." Not merely because of the unceasing calls upon her time and care, to feed them, and nurse them, and mend their wretched little ragged garments. This did Ruth good by taking her out of herself; but this, though this was much, was not all. Over and above this, Ruth found Tommy and the baby the most perfect, the most sympathizing, the most successful of comforters. She talked to them as she could not have talked to any grown-up person. Instead of brooding over her loss, she relieved her heart by speaking constantly of her little one. Over and over again she told them what a sweet darling treasure she had been, far sweeter than any other baby in the world; and now she was a dear blessed

little angel, with white wings, flying about in heaven, where Tommy and Baby would see her some day, if they were very good. And Baby lay smiling in her sleep, soothed by the low musical voice; and Tommy sat and listened with all his eager little soul, and wondered how far off heaven was, and resolved he would be very good, and go there, "certain sure."

PART II.

"With charitable hand,
Took up a beggar's issue at my gates."
SHAKESPEARE.

On the fourth evening after her child's funeral, as Ruth sat sewing by the fire-side, one foot on the rocker of the cradle in which Baby lay asleep, whilst Tommy had long ago been put to bed upstairs, she heard a well-known step on the pavement, the latch of the door was suddenly lifted, and her husband came in.

Ruth met him at the door, with flushed cheeks and tearful eyes.

"O Robert, Robert," she began. But he cut her short roughly and unexpectedly.

"I know, Ruth, I know," he said; "but what's this I hear concernin' you takin' in other folks' children?"

He had kissed her fondly enough when he first entered, but Ruth felt chilled to the heart. She wiped away her tears, and in a low disappointed voice told her husband how the children had been brought to her, and tried to excuse herself for not refusing to have them.

"I did so hope you wouldn't be displeased," she added apprehensively; for quiet, timid Ruth shrank from displeasure, and above all from hard words, as much as another woman would from blows. But her husband was in no mood to be indulgent. He had been terribly overcome on the quay, by hearing the news of his child's death; and with some men the first result of sorrow is a peculiar blind anger, which vents itself in a strong desire to find some one to blame.

"Do make haste an' get me some supper, Ruth," he said. "As to the rest, you might ha' known I shouldn' be pleased. You've acted very ill-considered, Ruth. You ought to ha' thought how hard I do work for my own, afore givin' way to your fancies, an' bringin' in other folks' children."

Ruth turned away to hide her tears, and busied herself with her preparations. Her husband seated himself by the fire, and waited in gloomy silence till his supper should be ready. Ruth thought his mood was one of sullen anger towards her. She was mistaken: it was only heaviness of soul for the loss of the child he had loved. It frightened her. She had never seen her husband so before, and she hardly dared speak to him. She had sweet winning ways of her own, and the natural tact of a loving nature seldom failed her; but now a nervous timidity kept her silent and constrained. Added to this, even gentle Ruth could feel a little resentful sometimes, and she was grievously hurt by her husband's apparent indifference to the child's death, and her sorrow.

Every moment of silence increased the difficulty of speaking. She placed food on the table, and her husband prepared to begin his supper in silence. But his reverie by the fire had shaken his composure, and his hand trembled and his lip quivered, whilst the food lay untasted before him.

Just then the infant in the cradle stirred in its sleep, and Ruth moved hastily to quiet it. Then the passion of the man's grief broke forth.

"To think," he cried, in a choked voice, "that you can make yourself happy wi' other folks' children, when our own poor darlin'——"

He could not go on: he covered his face with his hands. But he had already gone farther than poor Ruth could bear. With a cry of sudden anguish she threw herself on the ground beside the cradle, hiding her face in the chair where she had been used to sit to rock her infant, and gave way to a perfect paroxysm of grief. No one, and least of all her husband, would have deemed gentle Ruth capable of such violent agitation.

In vain did her husband, with a sudden return to his better self, hasten to console her, calling himself a brute to vex her, and entreating her, with every endearing word he could think of, to be comforted.

Ruth actually writhed in his arms with the convulsive passion of her sobs, and gasped for utterance, whilst for several minutes unable to articulate a word.

"Oh, I can't bear it! I can't—I can't!" she sobbed forth at last. "Oh, my baby, my baby! I wish I

was dead. Oh me! oh me! I wish I was dead, I do —I wish I was dead!"

Her husband, his own eyes streaming with tears, could only place her with clumsy tenderness in the rocking-chair, and wait till she should be herself again. Very soon he saw her evidently struggling to regain her self-command. Then after a little while the sobs subsided, though he could see she still trembled with agitation, and at last a wan smile flickered for a moment across her lips.

"I be so sorry, Robert," she said faintly; "I didn' mean to cry like that there. But I couldn' help it— I couldn' re'lly, Robert!"

Before she had finished his arms were round her, and he was calling her his sweetheart, and his treasure, and his poor little darling wife, and every fond name he could think of. And then they sat a long while in silence, until Ruth, leaning against her husband, and feeling his strong arm round her, took courage to tell him the little common-place story, which was to her the most moving tale that could be told. How Baby was took ill, and how she was frightened and sent for the doctor, and how the doctor said Baby never wouldn't be no better; and how, after long sad hours of watching, she saw her darling die; and how she laid out the little corpse, and went forth in her grief to beg (she who had never begged before in her life) at the doors of them as was known to have a kind name in the town, for means to bury her child decently.

Had Ruth been at all a scheming woman, she might

have seized the opportunity of her husband's softened and somewhat self-reproachful mood to persuade him to let her have her own way in the matter of Susannah Bird's children. But Ruth was far too simple. She merely tried to keep Tommy and Baby as much out of sight and hearing as was consistent with her limited domestic accommodation, and their imperious infantine fashion of expressing their wants.

The morning after her husband's return, she herself was the first to allude to their presence.

"I be sorry now, Robert," she said, "as I ever took 'em in. But oh! you don't know how lonesome it were; I were most crazy, sittin' by myself."

"Ay, Ruthie," he answered tenderly, "I don't want to be blamin' of 'ee any more. An' indeed I be sorry I spoke so sharp last night. But just see what have happened! Sukey Bird have made off wi' Tinker Jonas, an' lef' us wi' the childr'n on our hands."

"No!" cried Ruth, "she haven't, surely!"

"Of course she have. An' they do say the police wants her along o' that shopliftin' business. Nice respectable person's childr'n to have in a body's house!"

"Oh, Robert! an' she told such a story——" began poor Ruth.

"Which you was fool enough to believe," he answered, kissing her. "I've got a little missus as is uncommon easy to take in, I have. But just you listen to I. You takes these two childr'n to the Union Workhouse so soon as ever I be gone to my work. Other folk may leave their childr'n to my door, but I baint the man to keep 'em."

"But, Robert——"

"Now don't 'ee say a word, wife. I do mean what I do say."

"But, Robert, we *must* keep 'em a fortnight: she've paid for their keep."

"What, Sukey Bird?"

"Ay, she have."

Robert gave a long whistle of incredulity, vexation, and surprise.

"Oh, Ruth, my girl, what a soft you be!" he ejaculated. "Well, there, I suppose they must stay out their fortnight. But, mind you, to the Workhouse they goes the very next mornin' after; for I 'ont keep other folks' childr'n. So now let's say no more about it."

Ruth readily complied. She did not say another word on the subject. She only lavished warmer tenderness and more loving care on the poor little things, who were so soon to be consigned to the stern protection of the Board of Guardians, to what Ruth considered the dire disgrace of being brought up in a workhouse.

In return, her husband never again reproached her with having taken charge of the children. He simply passed over their presence in his house without notice or remark. He had a great horror of making Ruth cry; and he considered it was hardly worth while to make a fuss about an arrangement which must be over in a few days.

This line of conduct he successfully maintained for two days. The first day Tommy was shy. He hardly

knew whether the new comer was a safe person for little boys to go near. Some human beings he knew were not safe at all, especially when they were drunk. However, by the end of the second day, he had quite left off thinking it necessary to hold tight by Ruth's gown whenever her husband was in the room. In fact, before evening, he grew so noisy and merry that Ruth put him to bed, as a precautionary measure, to get him out of the way. She even resorted to awful threats of what she would do to him if he wasn't good, to keep him quiet; but Tommy, accustomed to more formidable menaces, absolutely laughed in her face, and had to be kept quiet with peppermint lozenges instead.

On the third day Robert Stevens, who was employed on what he called an odd job on the Quay, came home early, and found Ruth with the baby on her knees, and Tommy prattling beside her.

"Pretty sight!" he thought, and he wished the children were his, as he settled himself in his wooden arm-chair by the fire. Ruth thought he was going to sleep, as he often did when he came in tired, for he closed his eyes, and stretched out his legs towards the fire, in a favourite though not picturesque attitude. But, in reality, Robert was not asleep. Under the mask of a dignified indifference, he amused himself with listening to Tommy's quaint remarks, opening his eyes now and then to watch his little droll face, now serious and eager, now crumpled up into the merriest smiles. What a pathetic little figure of fun it was, with its pale cheeks and premature old-

fashioned ways, chattering, as children do, in the funniest tone of superiority, concerning his own small stock of acquirements, and the weakness, helplessness, and general incapacity, of Baby.

"Uncommon nice little boy," mused Robert Stevens, who had a true sailor's fancy for all little children. He would like to have taken him up on his knee, and have had "a regular game" with him at once, only a certain feeling of pride, and of determination to stand by his own words, forbade it. However, there were no scruples to prevent Tommy from taking notice of him; and the cunning little fellow contrived to set on foot a sort of game at hide-and-seek, which consisted in advancing just near enough to be ready to tumble over Robert's legs, and then darting back to Ruth's side, with a merry peal of laughter, in obedience to her uplifted finger and prohibitory look; all this being performed on tiptoe, in a sort of stage aside, because he was told to be good, and not to disturb folk. At last Tommy caught Robert Stevens's eye watching this mimic pantomime, and with a shout of delight he proclaimed, to Ruth's discomfiture—

"He baint asleep—not *he* baint. Oh, he be shammin'.—You baint asleep, be you?"

"No, my son, I baint," said Robert, with a burst of chuckling. "Well, if ever I see such a knowin' little chap!"

"Then let me ride on your knee," pursued the knowing little chap; and Robert immediately granted his request; and the two made friends over such an incomparable game of play, that Tommy declared, in

an interval of gravity, that it was "enough to make Baby laugh!" This remark tickled Robert's fancy amazingly. As soon as he had done laughing over it, he inquired of Tommy, "What *sucks* do 'ee like best, my chap?"

Tommy promptly replied, "Bull's-eyes, 'cause they be the biggest." And, to Ruth's astonishment, he actually carried the child off with him to the corner shop, that he might put his own dirty little paws into the bottle, and pick out the "sweety" he liked best. "And make hisself sticky all over," thought Ruth to herself, but she said nothing; in truth, she was far too happy that her husband had taken to the child, to mind stickiness.

From that day forwards Robert Stevens continued to take a great deal of notice of little Tom, and the child conceived a violent affection for him. Well, why should he not amuse himself with the child whilst it happened to be in the house? he said. He did not for a single instant let go his purpose of sending the children away the moment their fortnight was over.

He thought about it, however, as little as possible; for something told him that when they were once gone, he should miss them very much. He was still working on the Quay, and sleeping at home every night; and he could not help feeling that home would not be half so pleasant without Tommy's funny prattle and Baby's pretty ways. He was confident that Baby knew him, she used to look up in his face as knowing as could be; and as to Tommy, he was the very

nicest little chap in the world. No doubt but what Ruth, too, will feel the miss of her own child more when these are gone. What a pity they are other folks' childr'n! If they were but nobody's children, he might possibly reconsider the question of keeping them; but should he, an honest working man, support the forsaken children of such a regular bad 'un as Sukey Bird? No, they must go to the Workhouse. Was it not the natural home of the children of "such folk?"

As the end of the fortnight drew on, Ruth tried, now and then, to prepare poor little Tommy for his approaching fate. But she only succeeded in unsettling his infant mind; she could not make him comprehend that he was to be sent away.

One evening, the very last evening, Tommy was perched on Robert's knee, chattering of course, but chattering in a graver tone than usual, because both Daddy Robert and Mammy Ruth were a little silent and grave that night. Tommy, in unconscious sympathy with their mood, would talk of nothing but the lost darling of the house.

"I know why Mammy Ruth is cryin'," said the child confidentially; "'tis 'cause of little Emma. But she didn't ought to cry, did she? 'cause Emma's to heaven, that's where Emma's to. Ain't she, Daddy?"

"Ay, my son," the man answered; "but don't 'ee talk like that now."

"When folks die they puts 'em down a pit-hole," continued Tommy; "I've seen 'em! But Mammy Ruth says if they be good they gets wings, and flies away to heaven. Heaven's in the sky, she says;

but it don't matter, 'cause, don't 'ee see, they has wings."

"Hush, hush, little chap! don't 'ee see you be makin' Mammy Ruth cry?" said Robert gently.

"I will hush in a minute," the child answered; "but I do want to whisper summat. Let me stand up on your knee, an' put my arm round your neck."

And then the child startled both husband and wife by whispering the question—

"Will I an' Baby go to heaven when ye goes away from here?"

The man put him down sharply, and went out of the house. Ruth took him in her arms and kissed him, and said through her tears—

"Nobody knows when they be goin' to heaven, darlin', nor yet when anyone else is goin'. Only be a good boy, my precious, an' you'll sure an' get there some day."

Much later, when both the little ones were asleep, Ruth's husband came into the house again.

"Ruth," he said, "was it you put Tommy up to astin' that there question?"

"Oh, Robert, no! How could 'ee think so?"

"Well, it don't matter," said he; "but look here, my wife, how many children were your mother the mother of?"

"Thirteen," Ruth answered in a low voice.

"Ay, an' ten lived," he continued. "What's to prevent you an' me havin' the same, my girl? Do 'ee see what I be drivin' at?"

"Ay, Robert."

Ruth saw very well; but she was a silent woman. She knew what her husband meant; she felt a thousand undefined hopes and wishes stirring within her in opposition to his meaning, but she did not know what to say. At last she observed, with an appealing look—

"Two wouldn' make much difference."

"Ay, wouldn't they?" said her husband. "Ruth, Ruth, don't talk like a fool."

Ruth was silent.

"Now, look here, Ruth," he continued; "what I says I means, an' what I means I sticks to. You an' me be young, an' very like to have a family; an' got nothin' but what we works for. Right's right, my child, an' 'tisn't noways right that honest folk should pinch themselves to keep the childr'n of them as isn't honest. An' we couldn' do it without pinchin', not the likes of us couldn't."

"They be such little uns," Ruth remarked, with a sigh. She was thinking of Baby in the Workhouse nursery, and had hardly heard what her husband said.

"Ay, they be little," he replied; "but kep 'em now, we must kep 'em for life. But what's the use o' goin' on talkin'? What I've said I stand to. So let me find the childr'n gone afore I comes home to-morrow evenin'."

Ruth made no reply. Silently and sadly she went upstairs to bed, and lay long awake, haunted by every tale she had ever heard of workhouse neglect, her heart wrung by the thought that she herself must be the person to take the children to the Workhouse,

and consign Baby to the unloving arms of a pauper nurse. Robert, too, found that somehow he could not sleep well that night, tired out as he was with his day's work. And when he did sleep, he did nothing but dream of children: confusing Tommy, Baby, and his own lost infant, in the most fantastic and unaccountable manner.

In the morning he rose silent and moody, earlier than was his wont, and went to his work with scarcely a word to his wife, and without taking any of his usual notice of the children.

Words were needless: Ruth understood her husband perfectly, and knew what she had to do. She did not attempt to disobey him. When he returned in the evening she was sitting at work by her solitary fire-side, and he knew from his first glance at her face that she had parted with Tommy and Baby, and his house was no longer invaded by the presence of "other folks' children."

Well, was it not just what he desired? he asked himself. And then he remarked, with a sort of injured feeling, that Ruth was very pale, and that her face bore unmistakeable traces of tears. Still he felt he had no right to complain, he almost wished he had; but Ruth seemed resolved to avoid making any parade of being in low spirits. She had perhaps had some struggle with herself about it, for she had evidently taken pains to make his home especially comfortable that evening, and she made a gentle attempt at cheerfulness, asking him little questions about his work, and the probable destination of his next voyage.

The attempt was not very successful. Robert gave short answers, and soon relapsed into silence. He did not mention the children till after the light was put out at night. Then at last he asked with an averted face—

"Was Tommy very loth to go, Ruth?"

"May One above forgi' me for deceivin' of him," answered Ruth, in a half-choked voice. "I let 'em tell un I'd be back for un direc'ly if a was good. But don't 'ee talk of 't, Robert, 'cause I can't abear it."

Robert remained silent for a very long time; so long that it would have been only reasonable to suppose that Ruth had fallen asleep. Then suddenly and without the slightest preparation, he burst out with the question—

"Which is visitin' days at that there place?"

"Wednesdays and Fridays," answered Ruth in a startled voice. "Oh, Robert, I thought you was asleep."

The next day Robert was even less at home than usual. He worked extra hours, and did not come in till nearly bed-time. Ruth noticed that he seemed dull when he left her in the morning, and dull when he returned at night. But perhaps, she thought, it might be her fancy, for she missed her little charges excessively, and had not yet learnt to feel cheerful without them, especially as their absence gave her so much leisure to mourn the recent loss of her own child.

She was sitting at work on Friday afternoon, having finished all her light household duties, dreaming

over her needle, and wondering whether Baby had found a kind nurse, and whether Tommy would grow up healthy, and sighing to think of the numberless little children who are thus thrown on the public care, and grow up like young plants in a garden, rather than young children in a home, when her reverie was interrupted by the lifting of the latch of the door.

Ruth started. It was a common thing for the neighbouring house-wives to go in and out of each other's cottages without ceremony; but Ruth knew that no woman stood at her door: she recognized the trick of her husband's hand, and with that nervous propensity to connect unexpectedness with misfortune to which timid women are often liable, felt a momentary tremor of alarm as she asked herself, "Whatever can have brought him home this time o' day?"

There was an instant's hesitation before he opened the door. "Come along, then," she heard his voice say to some unknown person without; and Ruth's heart gave a sudden throb, and she rose from her seat in breathless expectation, for there was a patter of little footsteps in answer to the summons, and—

"Here, Mother!" cried her husband, in a voice of suppressed exultation, as he entered the house, carrying Baby in his arms, and with little Tommy dragging after him.

Ruth could not speak; her heart was too full. She took the Baby from him and sat down, and fairly cried for joy.

"Now!" exclaimed Robert, "whatever be cryin' for, my girl? Do 'ee want I to take they back again?"

"We 'ont go back never no more," put in Tommy, laying his little pale cheek caressingly on Robert's breast, "not to that there big house, we 'ont."

And Robert did not contradict him.

"I never!" Ruth exclaimed, when she at last recovered herself. "I never 'ouldn't have believed it, not if I hadn' seen it myself, I 'ouldn't. Oh, Robert, I were that taken aback when you came in, it did strike I dumb like: but I be very thankful to have this here darlin' in my arms again. She don't look quite like herself though, do she? I haven't much opinion of they pauper nurses, not *I* haven't."

"Nor yet I haven't neither," cried Robert emphatically. "You do know, my girl, that there job on the Quay were finished this mornin', an' thinks I, I'll just go an' have a look at they childr'n. So when I sees Tommy, 'Tommy,' I says, 'be'st happy, my chap?' So he don't answer straightforrard—cunnin' little lad—but puts up his face close to mine, an' do whispery in my ear, 'Take I home, Daddy.' So I put un down, an' gied he some sucks to quiet he; an' then a ill-favoured kind o' girl come in wi' Baby. Says I, ''Tis a nice little thing, aint it?' Says she, ''Tis a little cryin' baggage, an' a body can't get no rest at night wi' 't.'"

"'Tis as quiet a child night-times as ever you see," cried Ruth, indignant.

"Well, I said naught," continued her husband, "'cause, don't 'ee see, where was the use? An' after a bit I riz up to go; but bless your heart, my dear, you should ha' seen Tommy. I do think if I'd ha'

left un, he'd ha' screamed hisself to death, an' clutched hold o' me like a drownin' man, he did! Says I, 'Tommy, let go, my dear chap, an' I'll come and see thee again.' Says he, 'I 'ont let go; take I to Mammy Ruth.' Then they began to pull un off of me, an' how he did fight an' scream, an' beg an' pray, all to once. An'" (there was a sudden choking in the sailor's voice) "I couldn' abear to leave un. So I just took an' brought un away. An' as I were bringin' the one, I couldn' leave the tother, specially as thik nurse were such a ill-favoured un. So I just took an' brought the baby too—an' that's all about it."

No other child was ever born to Robert and Ruth Stevens besides the infant Emma, whose life was cut short so early; but they brought up Tommy and Baby as their own, and worked hard for them, and loved them dearly, and tried earnestly to do their duty by them.

For years they were haunted by the fear that the real mother—the vagabond, disreputable Susannah Bird—would one day return and claim her children; but she never did. The children would have forgotten her altogether, but that their sweet Mother Ruth always taught them, morning and evening, when they said their prayers, to remember the name of that other mother, of whom they only knew that she had given them life, and then deserted them when they were very little.

After the lapse of some years Ruth and Robert began to suppose she must be dead, as nothing was

ever heard of her; but whether it was so or not they never knew.

They were amply rewarded for their loving care of the deserted little ones, by the joy and sunshine of their presence in the home that without them must have been childless; and by the dutiful affection of their adopted children, which was the comfort and blessing of their old age.

BETTY SLATER'S SKELETON.

PART I.

"Farewell life! my senses swim,
And the world is growing dim;
Thronging shadows cloud the light,
Like the advent of the night."

HOOD.

BETTY SLATER was an old woman, who lived in a solitary cottage, about two miles distant from a certain village in X-shire. The cottage was one of those rudely constructed tenements which are sure to rise out of the earth somehow or other, apparently partly built by human hands, and partly a natural product of the soil, wherever a strip of waste land, wide enough to grow a house, has accidentally been left by the side of the road.

As far as the accommodation of the human beings who live in them is concerned, these are, without exception, the very worst of all cottages; but it is a curious fact that their occupants are, on the whole, very little given to complaining of the defective architecture of their dwellings. If they do grumble

a little, now and then, at the discomforts they have to endure, they generally lay the blame elsewhere. It is all the fault of the rain that *will* come in through the roof, or of the wind that *will* blow so mortal cold o' nights, or of "the damp," that *will* come up through the floor; not of the friendly dumb creature with four walls and a roof, that has really done its best to shelter them for ever so long a time, and will continue to do so for ever so much longer, until, poor old thing, age gets quite the better of it, and it tumbles down.

Betty Slater's cottage belonged to this class of dwellings. She and her husband built it with their own hands a few months before the birth of their eldest child; or rather I ought to say, they "put it up." That, I believe, is the technical term for this sort of architecture. The construction of the building was very simple. It consisted of four walls and a roof; the four walls and the floor were made of mud, and the roof was thatched. How to make a chimney was the only thing which was a little puzzling; but with the assistance of one or two neighbours they managed to build one which, on the whole, was very successful: that is, the cottage was tolerably free from smoke, except when the wind was in one particular direction.

The interior was divided by a thin lath-and-plaster partition into two unequal portions. The lesser of the two was just large enough to hold a bed, and was lighted by a curious little window, about a foot square, which would not open. The fact was, that

this window had been an after-thought, let into the wall when the rest of the house was completed; and the Slaters, being in a hurry to move into their new abode, finished off the supplementary window in the quickest possible way. Some time afterwards, when their numerous family began to require increased accommodation, they added what they called a lean-to at the back of their cottage. As it was only intended as a sleeping-place for the lads, they did not give themselves the needless trouble of making it big enough for people to stand upright in; and when, in due time, the lads grew up, and went out into the world, and the maidens married, or went to service, and Betty Slater—her husband having died just after the youngest of her children had left the old home and taken to himself a wife—was left a widow and alone, the lean-to began to be disused, and fell into a half-ruined condition; till, in the course of a few months, Betty turned it into a pig-sty; which was, indeed, the only thing that it was fit for.

I do not know whether such cottages as the one I have described are ever built now. I have seen such a one in the very act of tumbling down; and I have seen another in the course of being enlarged by the addition of two rooms built of red brick, as big again as the old cottage; and I know people who have built such cottages, and actually inhabit them; but I never saw or heard of one in process of construction. Of course, the great charm which counterbalances the many inconveniences of such abodes, is, that no rent is paid for them. How the right to build such

houses on the strips of waste land by the roadside is acquired, I know not; I only know that such houses seem to be the natural growth of such land.

After her husband's death, Betty Slater lived alone in the old cottage for several years. Various causes combined to give her a rather exceptional position; not merely amongst her own descendants, over whom she was accustomed to exercise considerable influence, but amongst the whole circle of village neighbours, from the clergyman of the parish to the youngest child in the National School. Everyone paid her a sort of habitual deference, which Betty received in a royal and condescending manner as her natural right. One person, the Vicar's daughter, a young lady of great decision of character, did once venture to rebel against her ascendency. She dared to allude to the subject of cleanliness, and to hint that Betty's house —which was, alas! always pervaded by a peculiar odour, suggestive of pigs and old clothes—would be benefited by a thorough good cleaning.

Betty listened in wrathful wonder, and replied with Christian forbearance. She did hope, she observed, that the young lady would one day know what 'twas to be married, and to be the mistress of a house; and then, maybe, she might begin to have some notion what it took to keep a place clean.

"Anyhow, Miss," she added, with a benevolent smile, "if I was you, I'd give over tryin' to talk o' managin' to the mother of seventeen, as have brought up ten."

"Oh, Betty, I did not mean to hurt your feelings—" began the Vicar's daughter.

"No, no, Miss," was the answer; "you haven't no call to vex yourself 'bout o' that, not you haven't. You baint very old not yet, Miss, an' a body can make allowances!"

And the Vicar's daughter somewhat hastily took leave, and awkwardly made good her retreat back through the various obstacles, which seemed especially intended to place visitors at a disadvantage. For the approach to Betty's fire-side was rendered interesting by a series of little difficulties. First, there was a rickety stile which separated the down-trodden wilderness that Betty called her garden from the road; then there were planks, originally, no doubt, intended to prevent children from straying, nailed across the doorway—which was so low, that only very short people could stand upright under it; then there was an arrangement which I may describe, for want of a better word, as a blockade of furniture. Its outlet consisted of a narrow passage between the corner of the bed and the corner of the chest of drawers, through which no one could pass except sideways. Betty, from her entrenched position in the chimney-corner, used to watch the embarrassment of her guests—sometimes, if the visitor was no favourite, making double-edged apologies which were very like reproofs for awkwardness, but generally welcoming every successful struggle with the kindest condescension.

Notwithstanding these little inconveniences, Betty

always had plenty of visitors. People of all classes liked to come and sit by her fire-side, and Betty gave ready welcome to them all. The fact is, she had a real talent for society. There were no evening parties given in any house in the village that had anything like as much sparkle and life in them as the gatherings that used to take place in Betty's chimney-corner. Not even all the hard work of a hard life had been able to crush out her natural gifts. No one else could shine as she did in a *tête-à-tête;* no one else was so perfect in the art of making her guests entertain themselves, and of knowing by a kind of intuition what amount of social talent each possessed.

She was herself a fine-looking old woman, who had never been handsome in her youth. The habit of carrying all kinds of burdens on the top of her head had made her magnificently upright; and at sixty-nine her broad shoulders had scarcely begun to stoop. It was chiefly in her face that the record of time was written. Her hair was of that peculiar shade of light brown which seldom turns grey; and great shaggy eyebrows of the same colour overhung a pair of faded blue eyes. Her mouth was exceedingly wide, and was set about with countless wrinkles; whilst one large expressive tooth, sticking out in front, was the leading peculiarity of her countenance. Finally, her dress, always strangely assorted, sometimes ragged and tawdry, was worn with the imperial dignity of a gipsy queen. Indeed, in spite of her blue eyes and irregular features, there was something

about Betty which irresistibly reminded one of a gipsy of the purest Egyptian descent.

Betty had two strong points, on which she based her demand on the respect of her village world. You could hardly be ten minutes in her society without hearing what they were.

She had been the mother of seventeen, and had brought up ten; and she had never had to "come on the parish" in her old age. One of her sons had emigrated to America, and had done very well there; and from him she received a weekly allowance, which amply supplied her few wants, and even left a margin which she could employ in helping some of her other children, who had settled nearer home, and were as scantily provided with the comforts of life as their father and mother had been before them.

This was an old age of luxurious repose to Betty, whose younger days had passed in a hard, almost a fierce, struggle for existence. She might well be proud of having brought up those ten children; for no one but herself, and perhaps one other, knew what grim privations had joined hands round each child's cradle, what hardships the weakest and the strongest amongst them had often been forced to suffer alike. That one other was not her husband. He, though she loved him, and always maintained that he had been a good husband to her, had more often added to her cares than shared them. Betty's real helper had been her daughter Matty, a child whom the hotbed of necessity had forced into a responsible woman before she was six years old. She was a gentle

motherly little creature, and spent all the first years of her life in nursing baby brothers and sisters; entering into her mother's cares and anxieties, and helping with all her small strength to bear the family burden. She was about sixteen when she left home for farm service; and she took a situation very near home, in order that she might see her mother and the children as often as possible. Mother and daughter loved one another more dearly than I can say; and there was never so much as a cold look between them, until Matty was three-and-twenty; when, to the surprise of all who knew her, she began to keep company with the greatest scamp in the parish. In vain did her mother use all her influence and authority; Matty would not listen to a word on the subject; and when Betty, in desperation, bade her choose between John Ball and her own mother, she proudly married her lover, and went away with him to a distant village.

Betty hardly knew with whom she was most angry: with John Ball, for daring to look towards Matty; with the "fool of a farmer" who employed him, and thereby threw him in the girl's way; or with Matty for demeaning herself to listen to the good-for-nothing fellow!

Her anger, however, was not loud, but deep; and when the two were really man and wife, she ceased altogether to talk about it; but she never forgave her daughter. For twenty years those two, who loved each other so dearly, never spoke, never even saw one another.

This was the one great sorrow of Betty's life. Up to that time she had had many hardships, but few griefs. She had carried a light heart through cares and troubles that would have made a less cheerful person worn and wretched, and old before her time; but Betty had resolutely made the best of everything, and had vigorously pushed her way through life, with a laughing look in her eyes, and a joking word on her lips.

She could not make the best of Matty's marriage! All the wretchedness that she had foreseen actually came upon her daughter. As years went on, it became known that John Ball both neglected and ill-used his wife; though Matty bore all in silence, and hid, as far as she could, her household misery from the public eye. She persuaded her husband to leave their village home, and to take a house in the nearest town; hoping to hide herself amongst numbers from all who ever knew or cared for her before her marriage. Above all, she desired to hide herself from her mother. It would break her heart, she said to herself, for Mother to see what she was brought to.

Betty never sought her out; but she went on waiting for years for some word, some token, from Matty, to claim the love and forgiveness she was longing to bestow upon her; whilst, if curses could kill, John Ball would have died a hundred deaths since Betty first heard that he ill-treated her daughter.

None of her other children guessed how much she took the matter to heart. It was not her way to

brood over painful thoughts, and therefore in her innermost soul she kept the image of Matty carefully veiled, and that one sad memory was not often allowed to prevent her from enjoying her life.

At last, however, a time came when the mournful thought, so long kept at bay, would be kept at bay no longer. The least quick-sighted of her daughters-in-law noticed that "Mother" was "wonderful dull." Those of her own children who were the most observant, had long since discovered that her once busy tongue had grown strangely still, and that she, who used to be so fond of company, now often locked her door against all intruders.

For years it had been the custom whenever Betty was out of humour, or silent, or low-spirited, to say, "She's a-thinkin' o' Matty."

But never before, not even when the grief of losing Matty had been freshest, had Betty's fits of depression lasted for weeks together, as was now the case. Many were the discussions held by her sons and daughters, as to whatever could be the matter with Mother; but every scheme they devised for rousing and cheering her failed signally.

At last, one day, a favourite grand-daughter, who had married and settled at a distance, came home to visit her parents. Betty had loved her for her likeness to her Aunt Matty, and the girl in return was very fond of her grandmother, and was much concerned to hear of the change that seemed to have taken place in her.

She soon found her way down to Betty's cottage, carrying in her arms a great heavy child of eight months old, Betty's great-grandchild. Often since the child's birth she had pictured to herself the pleasure it would be to show him to her grandmother; and enjoyed beforehand the broad smiles and amusing remarks with which she expected him to be received.

But Betty merely took her great-grandson on her knee and caressed him, and gave him many long silent kisses. Only once she smiled, when the over-anxious young mother said, "Oh, Granny, do 'ee take care an' not let un fall. He do be so lively like. A body has to be always watchin' of him." Then Betty's old smile crossed her face for an instant, as she answered: "Ah, my dear, do 'ee think I've been the mother of seventeen, an' don' know how to hold a baby!"

The next moment she bent very low to kiss the child; and his mother saw two tears suddenly fall on his fair white forehead. Looking up, she caught sight of Betty's face, all tremulous with emotion; and when she knelt by the old woman's side, and entreated to be told whatever was the matter, the only answer Betty made was to burst out crying.

"O Granny, do 'ee, do 'ee tell us what 'tis a grievin' of 'ee," cried the younger woman, much frightened at such an unusual occurrence. "You'd feel ever so much easier if you'd open your mind to somebody. Don't 'ee cry so. Now don't 'ee, there's a dear Granny. Oh my! whatever shall I do?" She broke off as her

boy set up a lusty roar, and she had to give all her attention to quieting him.

"My dear," answered Betty, when the child was hushed, and she herself more composed, "I be a very foolish old 'ooman, an' a very onreasonable un. When I do think as that there child o' yours is my fourth generation, it did ought to mind me as I am getting up in years."

"You baint very old, Granny, not you aint."

"No, Lisbeth, I baint. My mother were ninety-nine afore she died, an' I never heard as anybody cast it up at her that she was undue old. And it do say in the Bible, threescore an' ten. I can't but say, Lisbeth, as I should ha' liked to live as long as Scripture says. If I'd a died when I was young, there wouldn't have been no more to say 'bout it; but as I *have* a lived to this present, I'd like to ha' seen out my threescore an' ten, if so be 'twas the will of God I should."

"An' so you will, Granny; you will live to see this little un grow up, you will."

"No, Lisbeth, no," said Betty sadly, "I haven't lived so long as I have a lived for nothin'. I've had my call, an' I knows it. Well, why not? I've had a deal o' pleasure in my life! My dear, I'm glad you come to-day. I was always fond o' you, an' I'm very fain to see your pretty face again afore I go."

"But, Granny," said Lisbeth, "what was the call? I'm thinkin' 'tis very like you've mistook yourself."

Betty sadly shook her head and made answer: "I

haven't let it pass my lips; not yet, I haven't, Lisbeth. An' I do know better than to frighten a young wife like you wi' such things. Only, Lisbeth my dear, I do know my time's near at hand, for I've had my warnin'. They do say there's none ever dies sudden, but has some sort of a warnin', an' I've had mine."

"Oh, Granny, you do make me *so* unhappy," said Lisbeth, beginning to cry.

"Now doent 'ee, my dear," said the grandmother; "there aint no call to shed tears, not yet, there aint. An' even if so be I baint to see my threescore an' ten, my days haven't been so very short. An' I've lived to see my fourth generation," she added, holding out her arms to receive her great-grandson. "An' he's a blessed beauty, he is, an' is goin' to grow up an awful fine man, tho' th' old granny maybe 'ont live to see ut. An' now, my chil', you may so well get the Bible, an' read I a chapter. I do love to hear 'ee read. I never was no scholar, not *I* wasn't; 'cause there wasn't no such schoolin' as there be now, not in my day, there wasn't. But I do love dearly to hear readin', an' I'd like to hear 'ee read a chapter now."

Lisbeth dried her tears, an' fetched the Bible from its place of honour, in front of the best tea-tray. It was a large handsome copy of the Scriptures, for which Betty, ignorant as she was of the art of reading, had once paid a great deal of money. She had taken it in numbers which were left at the door periodically by a travelling man. When, after a long time, the series was at last complete, she had sent it into the market-town to be handsomely bound, for which she

had not grudged to pay nearly a pound, in small weekly instalments.

Lisbeth laid the heavy volume across her knees, and turned over the leaves till she came to the history of the Prodigal Son. Her sole reason for choosing this chapter was, that she had often read it before, and knew all the hard words.

When she had finished reading it, Betty raised her head, and thanked her; and then added, that she had better put away the Bible and go, as it was time for her to be at home. And Lisbeth, after a little vain resistance to this dismissal, kissed her grandmother, took her child in her arms, and went.

PART II.

"Why stares she with unsettled eye?
Can she the bodiless dead espy?"
COLERIDGE.

The next day, when Lisbeth's mother and others of the family came eagerly to Betty's cottage, on purpose to "reason wi' her," and get "them notions" out of her head, and bent also on discovering in detail what "them notions" were, they found the door locked upon an empty house.

Betty was already gone out.

At the very moment that her daughters and daughters-in-law were uttering exclamations of wonder and surprise at the door of her deserted house, Betty her-

self had trodden the last step of a three-mile walk, and was quietly ringing the back-door bell at the parsonage.

She was very glad when the maid opened the door, and asked her to sit down on a chair in the passage, whilst she went and told master; for she felt weak and fatigued after her walk. So she merely asked the servant to take in her name, and tell the parson she wanted to speak with him at his leisure; and then dropped wearily into her seat, as though she cared very little how long she might have to wait. In many a household it would, no doubt, have been a very long time; but the Rev. Manlius Greatworthy was an early riser, and enforced the observance of early hours on his household. In a very few minutes the maid-servant reappeared; and, opening a door close at hand, hastened to let the light of day into the little sitting-room, near the back door, where the shutters had not yet been unfastened; and, almost before her task was accomplished, the heavy tread of the Rev. Manlius Greatworthy was heard approaching.

"Well, Betty," said he, in his cordial, cheerful way; assuming a little touch of the local accent in his speech, as it was his habit to do in his intercourse with his poor parishioners. "And what brings you here so early to-day? Not any trouble, I hope?"

"Not ezackly, Sir," answered Betty, rising and dropping a curtsey; "leastwise, 'tisn't no sickness, nor nothin' o' that sort. But there be a little matter as I do want to speak to 'ee about."

"Well," he answered kindly, "will 'ee come into my

study now, or go down into the kitchen and have a bit of breakfast first?"

"Astin' your pardon, Sir," she replied, "but if 'tisn't any illconvenience to 'ee, I'd as lieve get it off my mind to once."

"It shall be just as you like best," said the Rev. Manlius Greatworthy, leading the way into the study, with a total obliviousness of his own untasted breakfast which would have provoked Mrs. Greatworthy very much, if she had been there to see it.

"Well, Sir," proceeded Betty, as soon as she had been accommodated with a seat, and the parson had established himself in his own arm-chair, "perhaps you'll remember my oldest daughter——"

"Matty," said the clergyman, who had a wonderful gift for knowing all about his parishioners, and remembering with unfailing accuracy their names, ages, and occupations; "I shall be very glad indeed, Betty, if you've come to tell me you've forgiven Matty."

"Ah, Sir, you was always a tellin' of me I did ought to forgive the poor maid. But lor, Sir, so I did, in my heart. Whatever I did seem, I was that glad I can't say whenever I heard a body take her part."

"But then, Mrs. Slater, why not send to her, poor thing? I hope you've come to tell me you've done so."

Betty cast down her eyes. "No, Sir, I haven't," she said. "I was always a thinkin' as she'd come home, like the prodigal son, Sir; but she never did. I've watched scores o' times, an' fancied I'd see her in a minute comin' along ever so far off, an' then I might ha' runned out an' kissed her."

"'But, Betty, perhaps she cannot come. You don't know what she may have to prevent her leaving home."

"Ay, Sir, there's bitter truth in what you do say," the old woman replied. "I tell 'ee, Sir, how 'twas wi' Matty an' me. When she were a little maid, I were that taken up wi' her there's no tellin' it. An' as she grew up I never saw her equals. None o' the other maids came nigh her for sense an' cleverness. She were so quiet an' steady, too, an' fond o' home, and never went after no young man till she were three-an'-twenty year old; an' then she broke my heart, an' began to keep company wi' that there Ball, as was no better nor mud by the side o' she. Well, I set my face agen un so firm as ever I could; but one night Matty she come to me, and says she, 'Mother, I never went agen your will in my life, an' I never 'ool. But there's things as is more nor I can bear; an' if so be you can't anyhow gi' consent to my bein' John's wife, yon pit shall be my wat'ry grave!' The pit she meant were a great piece o' water as she must pass in goin' back to the farm where she were in service. An' she looked so awful determined like, that I thought, if I don't gi' consent to-night, it'll be too late to-morrow. So says I, 'Matty, take your own will. I've only one more thing to say to 'ee. When you come to want an' misery, as I do know you will, don't never come and wring *my* heart wi't. If you do make your own bed, 'tis you as must lie in it. An' now use your own mind, an' go, for I be cruel weary.' Well, Sir, she fell a cryin', an' threw her arms about

my neck, an'. kissed me, an' kissed father, an' went in an' saw the childr'n in bed, an' kissed 'em all round. Says I, 'Matty, bide here the night.' Says she, 'I can't, mother,' an' kissed me again, an' took up her bonnet an' went. An' I heerd her sobbin' as she went down the garden. An' that's the last I seen of her for twenty years."

Betty's voice quite broke down as she said these last words, and she hid her face in her apron and cried. She had a very pathetic way of telling her tale, and tears stood in Mr. Greatworthy's eyes before she had done.

"And now," said he, "my poor old friend, you've waited long enough for her to come to you, and you have decided to go and seek her out."

"That's some of what I do want to say, Sir," she answered, "but 'tisn't all, not *that* isn't. There's summat else I do want sore to get off my mind, yet I don't hardly like to bring it out."

The clergyman looked a little grave. "Whatever it is, Betty, I fancy you will find it a relief to make a clean breast of it," he said.

"Yes, Sir," said Betty, "that's just what I do think. Keep a care to yourself, an' it'll wear 'ee an' worret 'ee past anythin' you'd think. I do mind when I use' to tell Matty everythin'."

"And what is your care at present?" Mr. Greatworthy inquired.

"I be an old 'ooman," she made answer, "an' 'tis very like this world have got too tight a hold o' me; for 'tis certain I do feel mighty loath to leave 't. But

there, Sir, we mun' all go when our time comes. An', Sir, I've had a token, a very signal token, Sir, as do make me think my time be very nigh at hand. An' if I was on my dyin' bed, Sir, railly I donnot think my soul 'ould get leave to go, not afore I seen Matty. Leastways, I do *know* I couldn' lie quiet in my grave, not if I hadn' seen her afore I died."

"I don't think, Betty, you'll get much peace o' mind in *this* world, before you've made it up with your daughter," replied the clergyman. "But as to the next, I don't see any reason for imagining you're going there just yet. We all get tokens as we grow old. Every grey hair is a sort of gentle reminder, that in the natural course of life our steps are leading us to our graves; and, therefore, we ought to set our houses in order, and keep ourselves ready. But you may have many years of life before you yet, Betty. You are not yet threescore and ten, remember."

"No, Sir, 'tis very true; I haven't live' as long as Scripter says old people has a right to live. But folk do die at all ages; an' I do take the churchyard stones to witness of 't. An' when folks is to be called away on a sudden, they do most times get a warnin'. An' I've had a most uncommon particular warnin', Sir."

"I think you had better tell me what you mean, Betty," said Mr. Greatworthy; "perhaps I may be able to find you another interpretation."

"I do mean to tell 'ee, Sir," said Betty; "I come here a purpose, 'cause I couldn't keep it to myself no longer. An' I'd a deal sooner tell you, Sir, nor anyone else. Well, Sir, 'tis just this,"—she paused, and

bent forwards, placing her two hands on her knees, and speaking slowly and in a half whisper,—"day an' night, week-day an' Sunday, whensoever I do lift up my eyes an' look straight out of 'em, I do see a Rames,[1] a bony Rames, a hangin' in th' air right afore me!"

"A Rames!" repeated the clergyman.

"Ay, Sir," she answered, with a shudder; "a skelington, I do think you do call it."

"But, my good woman, 'tisn't possible!" cried the clergyman; "I assure you it must be fancy."

"I've not been the mother o' seventeen an' brought up ten, to give in to fancies now I'm old," Betty answered doggedly.

Mr. Greatworthy gave a despairing sigh. "What," he asked her, "do you really mean to tell me you see a skeleton daily before your eyes?"

"Yes, Sir, I do," answered Betty promptly; "whenever I do look straight up. I do see it now," she added, shuddering again.

"You see it now?"

"As sure as I be a livin' 'ooman, I do."

"And you think it a sign that you are going to die?"

"Whatever else could it be, Sir?" she replied.

The Rev. Manlius Greatworthy rose slowly from

1 "*Rames.* The dried stalks of beans, peas, potatoes, &c. (*Devon*). Also the relics of a branch after the leaves are off."—HALLIWELL'S *Dictionary of Provincialisms and Archaisms*. In the Somersetshire dialect it means *bones*, or a *skeleton*. It is almost an obsolete word. The original old woman who used it as related above, lived some fifty years ago. In the Glossary to Barnes's "Poems in the Dorsetshire Dialect" we find "*Riames* (A-S. ream, *a ligament*; Ger. rahm; Dan. ramme, *a frame*). A skeleton; the frame or ligaments of anything."

his chair, and began thoughtfully to pace up and down his room. After a few minutes he stopped, and said to Betty, "I suppose it's no use asking you to describe this skeleton?"

"Well, Sir, 'tis just like any other Rames—skelington, I mean."

"Did you ever see any other?" he asked.

"No, Sir, I can't say I have," she replied; "but there, 'tis all bony like."

"Ah!" said Mr. Greatworthy, looking as puzzled as ever, and beginning to walk up and down again. Presently, however, a light came into his face. He ceased to walk aimlessly up and down, and went straight to the bookcase, whence, after some consideration, he took down a dusty volume from an upper shelf, and began turning over the leaves where he stood.

Betty watched his proceedings with interest, feeling that, though calculated to make her impatient, they had yet some bearing on the subject in hand.

At last he seemed to discover what he wanted, for he adjusted his spectacles, and carried the book to the window to get a better light. Then, with an air of satisfaction, he laid it down, carefully placing a mark between the pages, and once more turned to Betty.

"Would you mind coming to the window, and let me look at your eyes a little?" he said.

"No, Sir," said the old woman, rising with alacrity, and standing so that the light fell on her face.

There was nothing strange in the appearance of her pale blue eyes; nothing but an expression of perplexity at the parson's unaccountable behaviour, as

he stood for some minutes examining them with the closest attention.

"Betty!" he said at last.

"Sir?" she replied inquiringly.

"Lift up your eyes, and look straight before you, and tell me if you see the skeleton."

"Sure enough, Sir, I do see un," she said sorrowfully.

"That is," he went on, "you see a sort of bony appearance, floating as it were before your eyes?"

"Well, Sir," she answered, "maybe that's what it 'ould seem like to some folk. It do seem to I like as if 't had a come straight out of the grave-yard, and I do seem it do keep on a sayin', 'Take warnin', take warnin'; the next grave as is dug 'll be yourn.'"

"And therefore," said Mr. Greatworthy in a gentle tone, "you've made up your mind to seek out and forgive your daughter Martha, and you're going to do so without further loss of time?"

"Yes, Sir, I be. I did make a kind of vow to myself afore I lef' home this mornin', that I 'ouldn' turn back till I've seen my poor maid again. Only I did want to open my mind to 'ee first. I do look to 'ee, Sir, to 'dvise I how I be to get to X-town (that's where we do suppose Matty is to). An' I did want to ask of 'ee, Sir, whiles it do lay in my power to do so, if I may have th' place by the two ellum trees, near by where my master do lie (a' had his faults, but a' war a good husband to I) for my grave?"

"As to the grave, Matty, if you die within a year I will manage that you shall have it; and as to helping you to get to X-town, I will do so very gladly, and

will give you a letter to a clergyman there, whom I know, and who may perhaps help you in your search. But I want to have a little more talk about this skeleton. You tell me you see it very plainly?"

"Yes, Sir."

"Now will you close your left eye, and keep the right one open, and tell me if you still see it?"

Betty obeyed rather scornfully; and there was a tone of reproach in her voice, as she said, "Of course I does."

"Very well, I quite understand that," he rejoined. "But now, just to oblige me, will you shut your right eye, and keep the left one open?"

Betty did as she was told savagely, as if she thought Parson Greatworthy was trifling with her feelings. Then suddenly she gave a great start.

"Well," he inquired, "what is the matter?"

"Oh, Sir!" she ejaculated in a trembling voice, "whatever can it be? The Rames is a-vanished."

As she spoke she dropped her hand, with which she had been covering her right eye, and opened both her eyes. Then without a second's pause, she exclaimed, "But 'tis come back again! Oh, my! oh, my goodness! oh, my heart an' soul!"

"Shut your right eye again, Betty," said the parson.

"'Tis gone again, Sir," she said in a whisper.

"Then don't you see, Betty," he continued, "that this skeleton is a something that you can see with your right eye, and not with your left?"

"Stop a bit, Sir," said Betty. And then, after a short pause, during which she had been trying various

experiments with her two eyes, "'Tis true, Sir, my left eye can't see 't."

"And I'll tell 'ee the reason why, Betty," continued the parson; "'tis because the skeleton is a something in your right eye."

"Eh, Sir?"

"A doctor could explain it to you better than I can," he said. "However, I'll try. The thing you see, which has caused you so much alarm, is a sort of horny spot on the surface of your eye. Why it should look like a skeleton to you I can't say. I suppose it is because it's so very near to you—summat that's grown on th' outside of your eye, Betty." He raised his voice and altered his way of speaking as he said these last words, seeing Betty's look of utter bewilderment.

"Why, however did a' get there, Sir?" she asked, shutting her open mouth with a sudden snap of comprehension.

"I can hardly tell you, Betty. I have heard of such things before; and in this old book about medicine—(he laid his hand on the book, which he had put down on the table)—I'm led to think that it must be in some way the result of inflammation. Tell me, Betty, have 'ee ever had your eyes bad?"

"It's a thing I was always very subjec' to," she rejoined; "but they wasn't never very bad indeed, not *my* eyes wasn't. An' I've been the mother o' seventeen, an' had never no time to think much o' trifles."

"Well, Betty, the consequence of your eyes being bad, is that this bony sort of thing has somehow

grown on your right eye. At least, so I suppose; but you had better ask some doctor about it. Let me see! I will give you a ticket for X-town Hospital. Who knows whether it might not end in blindness if neglected?"

"I do thank 'ee kindly, Sir," said Betty instinctively, "but——" she made a long pause, whilst she plaited the bottom of her apron, "I do begin to think, Sir—I may say I be 'most persuaded of 't—as I haven't never seen no Rames at all—nor—nor—never haven't had no sign nor warnin' neither!"

"Nay, Betty, I did not say so. I only said perhaps I could find some other interpretation."

"Ay, Sir. But you have a made 't very plain to I."

"Very plain that you have seen no skeleton," he said; "but I do not think it at all plain that you have had no warning. Far from it! You have had a very distinct warning; and if you will listen, I will tell you what I think it says."

"Ay, do 'ee, Sir," said Betty.

"I told you, Betty, that we all have warnings. Those especially who live to grow old get them often. You have had many, Betty. They come so quietly and so much in the usual course of things, that sometimes people forget to notice them; but what they say is very plain to those who choose to listen."

"How do 'ee mean, Sir?"

"I mean this, Betty. I mean that every time anything has happened to you to remind you that you are growing old, you have received a warning, sometimes gradual, sometimes sudden, that the end of life

is drawing on. Now you have just told me that you have had a very signal warning; and so you have. I fear very much that the bony appearance that you describe may be the beginning of blindness in your right eye——"

"So long as 'tisn't no Rames, I don't mind," put in Betty.

"Still there is no harm in taking it as a warning; and I will tell you what it says," continued the clergyman. "It says, Elizabeth Slater, how much longer are you going to wait before you seek out your daughter, and forgive her, and give her your blessing, before 'tis too late? Take warning, and don't wait a day longer. This failing in your eyesight is a fresh sign to you that the evening of your life is already here; make haste to be at peace with your own flesh and blood before the night overtakes you."

"Oh, 'tis true, 'tis true!" Betty exclaimed, hiding her face, and trembling with her sobs. "O my Matty, first child as I ever had, I'm a comin' after 'ee this blessed minute!"

She started up, as though she were really about to set out that instant, but Mr. Greatworthy gently prevented her.

"Betty," he said, "you shall go to-day. But it must be on the box of my carriage, which is going to drive to the nearest station this morning. From thence to X-town it is but twenty minutes' journey by rail. Then I'll give you a note to an old servant of ours, who will advise you where to put up for the night—you will hardly expect to return before to-

morrow; and besides this, I will write to my friend the clergyman. And may God speed you in your search."

"I do hope He will!" ejaculated Betty; "an' I'll do as you do say, Sir, an' thank you. I do be 'most afeared o' them new-fangle railways, but folk 'ould laugh at such a old-fashion' notion, 'ouldn't they now, Sir? so I'll just risk it, and—thank 'ee kindly, Sir, an' I'll go in the kitchen, an' tak' a dish o' tea, as you do be so 'bligin' as to ast I—but I donnot want no money, not at the present, I don't, 'cause I've a looked forrard to this here time for many a long day, so I baint so unprovided like, do 'ee see, Sir?"

PART III.

"Welcome, life! the spirit strives,
Strength returns, and hope revives;
Cloudy fears and shapes forlorn
Fly like shadows at the morn."

HOOD.

It was about six months after the above conversation that Mr. Greatworthy rode up to Betty Slater's cottage, and, having fastened his horse to a gate-post near at hand, crossed the stile into her garden, knocked at her door.

"Do 'ee lift the latch an' come in, Sir," cried Betty's voice from the interior. "I've been lookin' for 'ee, Sir, ever sin' I been back, an' it do do I good to set eyes upon 'ee, it really do.—Do 'ee know, Sir," she continued, as soon as he had fairly completed his

entrance, and had taken a seat in the chimney-corner "I be threescore and ten years old to-day? Yes, I be, Sir. An' never felt better not for ten year, I haven't."

"Ah, Betty! I thought you were as likely to see your seventieth birthday as any woman in the village," returned Mr. Greatworthy. "May you live, and enjoy your health for many years longer!"

Betty sighed, and began smoothing down the folds of the black dress she wore. "We never know which is going to be took first, do us, Sir?" she said. As she spoke she looked across to the inner end of the wooden settle which stood in the chimney-corner. It was occupied by a heavy-looking youth, whose age might be somewhere between fifteen and twenty. His face wore a vacant expression, and his blue eyes had no sparkle in them. He had taken little notice of the visitor's entrance, but continued to watch his own thick clumsy hands, studded with warts, as he spread them out to the fire.

"Matty's oldest," she said, nodding in the direction of this figure. "Always been afflicted same as he be now, ever since he were born, Sir."

"Poor fellow," said the clergyman in a low voice; "is it true that you have taken him to live with you, Betty?"

"Ay, poor lad, I have," answered Betty; "an' you've no idea how much more cheerfuller it have a been. I never was partial to livin' alo-one. An' tho' Jem may be deaf an' dumb, an' a bit childish like, 'tis wonderful how I do get on wi' un."

"It must have been a great comfort to his poor mother to know you would take him," said Mr. Greatworthy.

"An' do 'ee think, Sir, 'twasn't no comfort to I neither? I tell 'ee 'twas the greatest o' comfort. I was a'most goin' to say 'tis all the comfort I has; but it 'ouldn't be true, not to say that, Sir, it 'ouldn', when I had the comfort o' bein' wi' Matty when she died, an' doin' for her myself. Oh lor, Sir, what 'ould it ha' been if Matty 'd a died afore I seen her, an' she seen I, an' we'd spoke to one another same as we used to?"

"I should not have known what to say to comfort you then," observed Mr. Greatworthy.

"You may say that, Sir. It 'ould ha' drove I crazy, I do think; an' now—it don't even hurt me so much as you'd suppose, to think Matty's gone afore I: 'cause she'd a hard life of it, Sir, a very hard life—and she's better off now, Sir. She won't never want for nothing, nor work herself to the bone for bare bread no more, Sir."

"You did not meet with so much difficulty as you expected in finding her," asked the clergyman, "when you went to X-town last spring?"

"No, Sir," she replied; "God were very good to I, an' I found her out 'most directly. Poor maid, she didn't want for I to see where she live' to, not first of all she didn't—but 'twern't long afore I got to know some of her trouble, and we got kind o' used to one another like. We was 'most strangers when I come first."

"Then after that you saw her several times?"

"Not so very often, Sir, 'cause she was situated so as 'twas best as I shouldn' come not *too* often. But she sent for I so soon as ever she were took ill, an' my arms was round her when she died."

Betty paused to wipe away her tears, and Mr. Greatworthy said a few kind sympathizing words. "He were always a feelin' gentleman," the old woman said to herself; but it was not so much his way of speaking as his way of listening that made her think so.

"Matty made a beautiful end," she went on quietly, when her tears were dried. "Ast me to forgive her for havin' married agen my will—an' I been so hard to her, an' never gone nigh her for twenty year. An' spoke so beautiful to her husband, she did! An' her two maidens come to see her, as she'd put out in place so young as ever she could—they be nice quiet maids—an' she gied um such good words.—But Jem, poor lad, he were kneeled down by her bed, an' got hold of her hand, an' kep' a strokin' of it, an' I see her eye for ever an' ever a goin' round to un—an' says she, 'My poor Jem, my poor dumb chap!' mutterin' to herself like. Says I, 'Matty, when you be gone to heaven Jem's going to live wi' I;' an' she shut her eyes an' lay back so peaceful like, so much as to say, 'Then all's right, Mother.'"

"And did she never speak again?" asked Mr. Greatworthy.

"Yes, Sir. Presently she opens her eyes, an' says she, 'Mother, don't 'ee make so sure o' my goin' to heaven, 'cause I aint fit for 't. I haven't never been

to church since my last baby were christened—I hadn' no clothes but the rags I stood up in. An' I done wrong so many ways, Mother!—I can't remember it all—but there,' says she, 'God do know how I was drove about. 'Tis certain I be a great sinner, yet I do seem I donnot feel afraid to go to un.' Then, after a bit, 'Mother,' says she, 'do 'ee tell I that there little verse 'bout "Gentle Jesus," as you did use to tell us when we was little childr'n.' An' while I was a sayin' of it she went away, Sir—just as I mind her fallin' off to sleep many an' many a time when she were a baby, an' did always use to go to sleep on my arm."

Whilst his grandmother had been speaking, the deaf and dumb boy had ceased to warm his hands, and sat upright, watching her intently. When she finished he went up to her, and looked piteously into her face, pointing to the tears on her cheeks, with a half-witted expression of puzzled concern.

It was not in Betty's nature to dwell more than she could help on any grief. She drew the back of her hand across her eyes, and patted the boy's shoulder with a smile. "You wouldn' think how much he do understan' of what I do say to 'n," she said. "Now to-day I've got a bit o' drippin' in house, an' we be goin' to have flop-jacks[1] for dinner. Jem's very partial to flop-jacks, an' you'll see how well he do know what I do say when I do tell un"—"Jem," she cried, in a loud sharp tone, "flop-jacks!" And she went

[1] "Flesh for holidays, fish for fasting days, and moreo'er puddings and *flap-jacks*."—SHAKESPEARE, *Pericles*, Act II. Scene i.

through strange various motions with her hands, intended to represent the making of a pancake. Jem nodded, and laughed, and made a clumsy attempt at imitating, though it was doubtful whether he really understood what she meant.

"Do but look at un," cried Betty triumphantly; and Jem, catching the idea that he had done something clever, went through the motions again and again, each time pulling Betty's gown, and laughing his poor foolish laugh to win her smile of approval.

It seemed a pitiful sight to Mr. Greatworthy, but to Betty it was evidently happiness. The care of that poor afflicted one was sunshine to her soul.

"And how about the Rames, Betty?" Mr. Greatworthy asked as he rose to go.

"O Sir, you was always fond o' your joke. I'm sure I can't think how 'twas I ever thought on a skelington, 'cause you know 'twern't never like one, not really it weren't——"

"But how is your eyesight, Betty?"

She looked grave. "I fear I be gettin' quite dark i' th' right eye, Sir," she said. "But even if 'twas both eyes, Sir, I 'ouldn' ha' had things different. If 't hadn' a been for the fright as it give me, I might never ha' seen my Matty afore she died. O Sir, you was right in every word o' that there warnin' you give me. I ha' seen out my threescore an' ten, same as you said I 'ould, Sir; but even if I should live to be ninety-nine, as my mother were afore she died, I sha'n't never forget what 'tis I do owe to that there Rames."

FOR BETTER, FOR WORSE.

PART I.

THE LOVER'S WALK.

"Think well for fear ye suld rue, Jamie;
Think well for fear ye suld rue, laddie."
Scotch Song.

IT ought to be considered as a peculiarly happy circumstance when any large town is so situated as to place its inhabitants within easy reach of a few really pretty country walks: field pathways, for instance, leading to neighbouring villages; shady lanes, with banks or hedgerows, where little boys and girls, born and bred in streets and alleys, may fill their hands with violets and primroses; meadows, enamelled with cowslips, stretching along the river-side; open downs, or bare hills, from whose summit one can look back upon the town as an indistinct mass of dwellings with a little blue smoke curling above them, and the towers of the churches, and the chimneys of the factories, uprising out of the midst; or woods, it may be, or plantations, left open for general enjoyment by some public-spirited gentleman. It is not

every town, either large or small, that can boast of even some of these advantages. Sometimes a locality may be so dull, so tame, so utterly uninteresting, that the sky is the only natural object, possessing anything like grandeur, or beauty, or variety, which is at all likely to meet anybody's eye. In other cases where the endowments of nature have been richer and more bountiful, fortune has done her best to spoil them, and trade has laid her grimy hand on all the environs for at least a mile round.

But the town of Arleigh, in X-shire, though a thriving place, and sufficiently choked with the dust and smoke of traffic on its northern side, possessed many a pretty outlet towards the south, and amongst these one of the most popular was a certain shady lane, leading into some fields, which formed a favourite short cut to a little village about two miles off.

This lane, whose proper appellation was Hunt's Corner, was very frequently spoken of amongst the working classes as "the Lover's Walk;" for although there were two or three equally pretty country walks round Arleigh, there was no other that was such a constant resort for young couples who were "keeping company," and taking their weekly walk together upon Sunday afternoons. Unless that "dearly loved" day that "comes between the Saturday and Monday" —as the old song has it—chanced to be wet, there were seldom less than two or three pairs of lovers to be seen sauntering up and down, wandering into the fields, or, in summer, resting on the stiles, which indeed, as well as the trees, were often ruthlessly hacked

about by those who *would* cut initials upon them, notwithstanding the endeavour that was made from time to time to prevail upon them not to "deface the young plants by carving," like Shakespeare's Orlando. The threatening placard put forth by the local authorities was of little avail, and only added the zest of stolen pleasure to the ardour with which the rustic artists used their pocket-knives; and both trees and stiles would have suffered even more than they actually did, if it had not been that the place was so public and so well known that everybody who offended in this way was certain to be detected, and often laughed at, in his own little circle of intimates and friends.

Some years ago, however, a young man cut two initials on the top bar of the stile that leads out of the Lover's Walk into the Strecholt Fields, who seemed to care very little either who found him out, or who laughed at him; for he cut his J. M. in the very centre of the bar, and then enclosed the letters in a circle, as if on purpose to draw attention to them.

"Well, I do think I've made a neat job o' thik," said he to his companion, when he had finished the last touches, and retired to a little distance to admire his work. "J. M.—James an' Mary—an' a line drawn round to show they do belong to each other; an' I don't care who do know it."

The girl sighed. "You've a done it beautiful, Jem," she said; and then added, rather wistfully, "Ah Jem, it do often come into my mind, perhaps we didn'

ought to belong to each other. I ain't fit to marry a man like you, as has been always used to have things comfortable; I've had such a rough bringin' up, I have. It ain't from the brick-fields as you did ought to take a wife, Jem, an' there your mother's right."

There were tears in the girl's eyes when she finished speaking, and a choking throbbing sensation in her throat, but she would not let her lover observe it, and turned rather abruptly away from the stile, as if to walk on. Jem put his knife into his pocket, and was at her side in a moment, drawing her arm resolutely through his.

"Now, Mary, my girl, don't 'ee talk such stuff—don't 'ee, my darlin'," said he; "it do put a chap in a rage, it really do."

"I do wish '*twas* stuff," murmured Mary, looking down.

"How long have you an' me kept company, Mary?" asked her lover, reproachfully; "ain't it 'most ever since we was children? Lor', Mary, who ever else have I cared for since you an' me was little mites o' creatures, an' *carried dabs* together in Graham's brickyard?"

For a moment the girl glanced upwards, and smiled as she encountered the fond eager look that was bent upon her; then looking down again she answered, with a half shade of petulancy in tone and manner—

"I do more 'n half wish them days was back again, I do!"

"What, ain't these better?" pleaded Jem. "Do look at a fellow, Mary. Whatever have I done to offend 'ee, my dear girl?"

"'You, Jem? Not nothing!" she said, very simply. "'Tis my own self I be offended wi'. Oh, Jem, Jem! I do wish I hadn't stopped on so long as I did a-workin' in the brickyards. I bain't fit for nothing else now. Nobody never taught me nothing belongin' to a house, an' I hain't got no management in me. . . Oh, Jem, I be so afraid I'd make 'ee a bad wife."

Jem laughed outright, and, no one else being within sight, fairly turned round and kissed her.

"You let I alone to see to that," cried he. "You'll make I a first-rate wife. What if you bain't the best o' managers at first, you'll soon learn; and, for the matter o' that, Mary, management ain't happiness. I've seen women as is so frightful cleanly, they'll burst out scoldin' of a man as comes home tired from his work if he do but bring dirty shoes across the doorstep 'thout wipin' of 'em. That ain't the wife I do want. I do want the girl o' my heart, Mary, wi' her dear smile, an' her sweet temper. That be the receipt for a happy home, I take it."

What Mary would have answered we know not, but just at that moment another couple got over the stile, and passed so close to our lovers as actually to overhear Jem's last words.

Of the new comers one was a short, vulgar-looking man, wearing a gaudy watch-chain and breast-pin, and the other a tall showy girl, with black eyes and hair and a bright complexion, who paused as she passed by, and showed a set of very white teeth, as she said, with a laugh, "Hallo, Jem!"

"Hallo, Jessie!"

"So that be the receipt for a happy home, is it?" And as Jessie spoke she made a sort of half-mocking inclination to Mary, and swept by without waiting for an answer.

Jem looked annoyed, and muttered some impatient ejaculation. Mary, too, had a vague, uncomfortable sensation that somebody had attacked her, and that she ought to do something to defend herself.

"Whoever's that, Jem?" she asked, uneasily; "she do seem to know you pretty well."

"Know me? Yes," and he replied, in an irritated tone, "why, 'tis my cousin, Jessie Basley."

"Dear me! You never telled me of her afore, Jem."

"I don't know why I should, my girl. She's none so great a favourite o' mine. A great, boldfaced thing!"

"Oh, Jem!" remonstrated Mary. "But *ain't* she handsome? An' dressed every bit as nicely as a lady, wi' that lovely gown an' scarf, an' a beautiful bow o' ribbon a-hangin' down her back."

"Handsome be as handsome do," growled Jem. "She do do my sisters a sight o' harm, a dressin' in that flyaway style, an' settin' of 'em up to do the same."

"Now don't 'ee be hard on folk, Jem. I were thinkin' how I wished I were as good-lookin' as she—an' as well dressed," she added, with a half sigh.

"I do like 'ee best as you be, Polly," said the young man, "an' I 'ouldn' have un like she, not for all the world."

"Be that gentleman her sweetheart?" Mary inquired.

"Gentleman! He bain't no *gentleman*," Jem an-

swered, scornfully,—"not he. He be one o' Graham's clerks up at th' office; an' a precious fool he be! An' Jessie be a bigger un for 'llowin' of him to take her out walkin'. I thought she were keepin' company wi' Jack Martin. But there, the flirtin' baggage can't never keep true to nobody. She'll carry on wi' half-a-dozen to once, an' never so pleased as when 'tis other folks' sweethearts."

"Oh, Jem, I hope she ain't quite such a bad un as you do make her out."

Jem gave a short laugh. "Poor Aunt has a heavy handful wi' her, I tell 'ee," said he. "As to Uncle, she do come round he wi' her enticin' ways, an' he won't believe nothin' against her. But let alone talkin' of she, do, Polly; I'd as lief talk of a toad. Tell I what 'twas made 'ee so downcasted like, when we came out first."

Mary sighed.

"I didn' want to spoil no more of our walk than I could help wi' talkin' o' vexin' things," said she. "But we must go in soon, Jem, so I'll tell 'ee now. 'Tis only that Mrs. Jennings have give me the sack."

"Well, what o' that, Poll?" Jem answered cheerfully. "'Tis all the more reason you should gi' consent to me puttin' up the banns next Sunday, as I do want you to. So don't you vex yourself no more 'bout that."

"Oh, Jem," continued the girl, very sadly, "but I *can't* help it. Missus did speak so sharp to me, it hurted me dreadful. 'It ain't no good tryin' to teach *you*,' says she, 'you be that awkward an' stupid. Your fingers be all thumbs, and you'd better take yourself

off to the brickyard again, you'll never be fit for nothing else. You've broke more in a month than your wages 'ould pay for in a year.' That ain't quite true, not that ain't: but she was terrible put out, 'cause I'd broken a china teapot as was give her when she married. But, oh, Jem, I *did* smash a many things in washin' up. She said I did handle 'em as if they was bricks."

Jem laughed. "Never mind, my girl. Let I put up the banns, an' you shall break as many things as ever you do like in *my* house. I daresay your fingers *was* all thumbs wi' that ill-tempered woman a scoldin' o' you."

"Well but, Jem, I can't bear the thought o' you havin' a bad wife. An' I meant to stop in service a year or two, if I could get anybody to take me, an' learn to understand a little, let alone savin' a little bit o' money against we get married."

"But I can't wait a year or two," insisted Jem, with all the impatient ardour of four-and-twenty, "an' what's the odds *your* savin'? I've a got enough for the two of us. Polly, dear, do 'ee listen to I, an' let I have my way. You don't know, my girl, what a wife an' a home is to a man. Why, merely the thought o' you have kept me straight many a time, when 'thout that I should ha' gone crooked. An' when I be tied to you, my darlin', I shan't never want to go to public-houses, nor yet to do nothin' else as I'd better leave alone."

Against such pleading as this, chiming as it did with the secret inclination of her own heart, poor

simple-hearted Mary's reluctance could not hold out. She did not openly give in at once; she let her lover go on with his persuasions pretty nearly all the way home, but just before he left her at the door of the baker's shop where she lived in service, she gave him to understand that she consented to his wishes. He might put up the banns next Sunday, and they would be married in a month. Jem himself lived with his father and mother, in a large, comfortable cottage close to the brickyard in which he worked, and nearly a mile out of the town. He set off briskly on his homeward walk, well satisfied with his afternoon in Mary's society, and his heart warm with love for his little sweetheart, but at the same time somewhat anxious as to how he was to break the intelligence of his approaching marriage to his parents, who had always looked coldly on his attachment to Mary, and had even refused to acknowledge that he was seriously engaged to her by allowing him to bring her to see them. She belonged to a rather lower class than they did, and they were always in hopes that Jem would one day throw her over and make a better match. Jem's home was not a very happy one, and as in imagination he forecast the way in which his Sunday evening was likely to end, amongst sharp speeches and altercation and scolding, he thought with delight what a different home he would soon have when he should be married to his Mary, and broke out into joyful whistling of "Home, sweet home," at the bare idea of it. Somebody laid a hand on his arm with a light laugh.

"Thinkin' about the receipt for a happy home, Jem?" said his cousin Jessie's voice.

Jem was displeased. "Is that you, Jessie?" said he. "What have you done with yon fine gentleman o' yours?"

Jessie laughed. "Left him behind in Arleigh, to be sure," said she. "I saw you on ahead, so I telled him I should walk home wi' my cousin. An' you needn' say nothin' of havin' met us, Jem, 'cause there'll be a horrid kick-up at home."

"I ain't goin' to tell no tales," growled Jem, "but if you was a sister o' mine——"

Jessie cut him short. "Oh yes, I know all that," said she, "but I ain't, thank goodness, so we needn' talk about that. Let's talk o' somebody else instead, Jem. What a funny little dear she is, with her great monster of a bonnet!"

"Ha' done, Jessie. She's worth a dozen o' you, at any rate. An' as to her bonnet, I'd liefer see a woman's bonnet settin' close round her face, than hangin' right down on her shoulders."

"Yes," replied Jessie, demurely. "'Tis so nice an' old-fashioned, ain't it? Wi' the tail o' one's frock off the groun' too, all the way round."

Jem actually stamped with irritation. A man is terribly at a disadvantage with a woman who is utterly reckless in the use of her tongue. He cannot knock her down; he cannot silence her; if he allows her to drive him into a violent passion, she only laughs at him, and makes him feel ridiculous. There seems to be hardly any limits to what he may not be made to

endure, particularly if he happen to be somewhat slow of speech and unready at repartee.

"Don't stamp, Jem," said Jessie, in a tone of quiet deprecation, and with a look of mischievous amusement in her black eyes.

"Let alone talkin' o' what's no concern o' yours, then," Jem burst forth. "Be I goin' to listen to 'ee, a turnin' folk into ridicule in your nasty, cutting, backbiting way, do 'ee suppose?"

Jessie burst out laughing. "Oh Jem, Jem, how easy 'tis to put your back up. Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha!"

Poor Jem! He tried to put on a grand air of offended dignity, but it would not do; he could not help both looking and feeling like a fool.

"Oh Jem," continued his tormentor, "how rude you do get when you be in a rage. Dear, dear, dear! I haven't laughed so much this long while."

"You've got the joke all to yourself then," Jem muttered angrily, "an' so I do leave you to enjoy it. Good evenin,' Jess. I be goin' home another way."

"Pack o' nonsense! Lor', Jem, don't 'ee see I be only teasin' of you? *I* don't want to say nothin' 'cuttin',' nor yet 'backbitin'' 'bout that dear, dowdy sweetheart o' yours, as *you*'ve 'cut' all old friends for, this long while."

"I don' know what you do mean," growled Jem, continuing to walk beside her, however, for he had not the wisdom to carry out his threatened retreat without rebutting this fresh attack, which confused him the more because it was a twofold one, both upon himself

and upon Mary. "I hain't cut no old friends—an' I'll thank you not to call persons names."

"Persons? Oh, my goodness! But whatever be I to call her then, if I bain't worthy so much as to hear her name?"

"Don't call her nothin'," said Jem, angrily.

"Mercy! Ain't nobody to dare so much as to talk about her? Oh Jem, 'tis a shame to tease 'ee so, but re'lly I can't help it when you do put on such an angry mug—Don't look so *very* comical, Jem, *don't.* Oh, dear, dear! I *must* laugh: I can *not* help it."

Laugh she did, till the tears came into her eyes, whilst Jem, with a sulky, offended air, tried to whistle and seem indifferent. Then she took out her handkerchief and wiped her eyes, and recovered her composure, and said in a winning manner, and in quite a different tone of voice—

"There, Jem, don't bear malice. I tell 'ee I was only teasin'. An' *t'was* a shame, an' I *do* beg pardon. Don't 'ee know if a thing comes into my head I *can't* help comin' out wi' it. I must have my bit o' fun, but never think but the worst I'd ever say against Mary Silifant in good earnest is, that she be a lucky girl to get a good husband, an' when you an' she be married I'll be one o' the first to wish 'ee joy: an' I do hope she'll make 'ee a good wife, cousin Jem."

In spite of the coaxing airs with which Jessie accompanied her speech, Jem was not very placable at first. He treated it as an attempt to cajole him out of his just resentment; but she persuaded and flattered him so skilfully, that they parted good friends

after all, at the gate of his uncle's cottage; which was the first in the row in which his own father also lived.

They parted with a cordial interchange of good-nights; yet Jem muttered an epithet of dislike under his breath as he turned away. She had altogether dispelled the mood of contentment and quiet cheerfulness which he had brought away with him from Mary's society. He felt ruffled and excited, and the desire to win his family to welcome Mary, which, earlier in the evening, had been uppermost in his mind, had given place to a determination to assert his own freedom from restraint, and to force them to acquiesce in whatever he chose to do.

Accordingly he opened the subject with a defiant announcement of his intention; but met with better success than he desired.

"Well, well, lad," his father said, "if 'tis to be, 'tis to be. You've stuck to the girl for a many years, an' though I could ha' wished it different I won't say nothin' more against it now. You be goin' to have the banns put up, an' I wouldn' have 'ee go back from your word. So, Mother," he added, turning to his wife, "we did ought to know our daughter-law; let Jem take an' bring her to see us nex' Sunday."

His mother nodded. "Ay, ay, Jem, take an' bring her," said she, "we've told 'ee what we do think of it, many's the time. For certain you might ha' done better than took up wi' a brickyard girl, and the Silifants hain't got the very best o' names; but you be old enough to use your own mind, an' I suppose we must put up wi' it."

"Put up wi' it!" ejaculated Jem angrily. He was precisely in that peculiar phase of irritability when the best mode of standing up for his Mary that would suggest itself to him was to attack and run down everybody else, and he proceeded to make a series of cutting remarks aimed at his own sisters, and the girls with whom they chiefly associated; which drew forth angry retorts from his mother, and exhortations not to lose his temper about nothing from his father.

Then his sisters came in, later than they ought to have done, and were first scolded, and then told what Jem had said about them, and drawn into angry altercation with him. At last the father cut short this wretched scene of domestic discord by rising from his seat, and declaring he should go to bed, it was enough to worry a man out of his wits to hear such everlasting quarrelling. As for Mary Silifant, if Jem did not want to bring her to the house, let her stop away. It was only to please Jem he had proposed her coming. Only do, for goodness' sake, let Jem hold his tongue.

Jem felt somewhat ashamed. He muttered something that was intended to be an overture of peace, something about a "chap" not being able to know what he said, when a "chap" was provoked, and growled out that he was off to bed too.

PART II.

A ROUGH CHILDHOOD.

"The path by which we twain did go."
TENNYSON.

It was on a warm evening in June that Jem Basley and Mary Silifant took that walk of which I have been telling you. Their banns were published on the following Sunday, and in the afternoon of the same day, Jem, having patched up his quarrel with his family, brought his sweetheart for the first time to his father's house, where she was received with all due kindness, and found Jem's mother and sisters less formidable, on the whole, than she had expected them to be.

For the near approach of a wedding has a curious power of acting like sunshine even on natures of rather a frosty type, and making them blossom into unaccustomed geniality and heartiness; and there are many women not generally too well known for having "the law of kindness" on their lips, whom some indefinable tenderness renders incapable of uttering a harsh word, or a bitter inuendo, to the girl who will be a bride in a month.

So the party in the Basleys' cottage went off very cheerfully; and though the chief amusement seemed to consist in making time-honoured jokes, which kept Mary's cheeks constantly blushing, and rendered Jem

nearly as hot and as red as she was, an effect which added piquancy to the general entertainment, and was always loudly, and with much laughter, pointed out to the company by some one or other of the chief wits of the party, yet it was all honest fun; there was no concealed vein of spite in anything anybody said: and when Mary rose to take her leave, and Jem to escort her home, Mrs. Basley embraced her future daughter-in-law with considerable warmth and affectionateness, and the young couple left the house amidst a chorus of good wishes and humorous remarks.

Mary had looked forward to that visit as to a terrible ordeal, and she heaved a great sigh of relief that it was over; and over, too, in a manner that had given satisfaction to Jem, as she who knew his face by heart could very well perceive, though he did not say so, but merely drew her arm within his, and asked—

"Well, little un, and what did 'ee think of it all?"

But, then, was she not always aware that whenever he called her by that old pet name of their childish days, it was a sign that he was specially pleased with her?

They had had a little difference, a "miff," as they call it in X-shire, since the preceding Sunday. Jessie Basley's words had rankled, and Jem, almost for the first time in his life, had felt a little bit dissatisfied with his Mary. However strong a man's love may be, and however self-reliant and determined to choose for himself, without submitting to anybody's

interference, he nevertheless is seldom indifferent to the impression the girl of his choice makes upon others. Jem did not like to think that Mary's attire was dowdy enough to be laughed at, and he grumbled to himself that she *might* have tried to cut a smarter appearance.

Something of the sort he hinted to her at their next meeting, and Mary cried with disappointment, for she *had* done her utmost to look well, and (all for Jem's sake!) had expended a great deal of thought and pains on her humble toilet; that very bonnet—it had been given to her by a lady—and she had cheerfully fasted on bread and water for a fortnight, in order to save the money to buy a gay ribbon to trim it with—and now to hear Jem call it dowdy, when it was still almost as good as new! Mary cried the more bitterly because she felt dimly certain that her lover had felt ashamed of her. As soon as she could dry her tears, she returned to her old lament, that she was not fit to be his wife. But of this Jem would not hear. The mere mention of such a thing drowned the thought of bonnet ribbons, and excited him to an outburst of mingled tenderness and indignation; for homely Mary Silifant was in truth, at that time, the "one woman in the world" for him; his happiness was bound up in her, and the idea of a life apart from her was one which his mind utterly refused to conceive.

Mary believed all he said, as she always did, and was happy; and Jem went and bought her a foolish veil, to make her look more like Jessie, and Mary was immensely pleased with it, but did not exactly know

how to put it on ; she also gave her bonnet a remarkable appearance, by tipping it a little backwards, so as to keep it off her face, in a way quite foreign to its construction, a performance that Jem's sisters and Jessie Basley laughed at after she was gone ; but as Jem never heard of their amusement, it did nobody any harm. He walked home with his sweetheart thoroughly happy in the recollection that his family had at last received her with proper cordiality, and that his father had said he had no idea what a nice-looking girl she was, until he saw her in her Sunday things.

He had seen her often enough before in a very different kind of dress—a short, scanty gown, frayed into rags at the bottom, patched clumsily on the bodice with scraps of another material—short sleeves tucked up above the elbow, to give free play to the red bare arms—and a faded clout, that might once have been a bonnet, laid cushion-like on the top of the head, to serve as a rest for various burdens : this was the costume in which, for several years, Thomas Basley had been accustomed to see Mary Silifant. For Thomas Basley was a "brickmaker" in Graham's brickyard, and Mary Silifant had been a brickyard girl, and had worked in his gang from early childhood almost until the present time.

Mary belonged to a family some steps lower down in the social scale than the Basleys. Those who are familiar with cottage life know well that the various gradations of station amongst those who receive weekly wages are as numerous and as marked as

they are amongst those who pay them; and the Silifants were nearly at the bottom of all. Debt or difficulty was their natural atmosphere; regular employment was what few of them would submit to; and in the winter starvation was never far from their door. It is true that Mary's father, John Silifant, sometimes worked in Graham's brickyard, but it was only as an extra hand when there happened to be a press of work; he was too lazy and worthless, and too fond of drinking, to be engaged anywhere on any other terms.

"My husband's out o' work"—"My husband's been such a long time out of work," was Sarah Silifant's constant plea for help to the charitable ladies of Arleigh, and the whole course of her life was one of unceasing struggle, and making shift to live.

Mary was the only child of a former marriage. When she was not quite five years old her stepmother pronounced her a great girl who ought to be "doin' summat for her livin'," and sent her into the brickyard to earn her bread. There was work at two shillings a week even for such mere infants, and Mary was set to hand dabs of soft clay to the brickmaker, who passed them on to an older child in the shape of unbaked bricks, to be laid in rows to prepare for the kiln.

Each brickmaker has a considerable gang of children, and half-grown boys and girls, to wait upon him; and as it is the usual practice for him to hire them himself, it is not uncommon for the gang to be principally composed of his own children, and those of

his kinsfolk and near neighbours. This is often a very advantageous arrangement for the children, and especially for the younger ones. Instead of being forlorn little units that belong to nobody, they are working amongst their own people, and are taken care of, and considered for, accordingly. Sometimes, indeed, they are made such pets of that to work in the brickyard becomes a delight and a privilege, as in the case of a very small boy and girl that I heard of the other day, who thought it the greatest promotion to be allowed to "carry dabs" for their grandfather, and were by no means grateful for the law which has lately debarred them from that privilege. But then the old man adored his grandchildren, and would not have overtasked them for the world; and the boy used to come for one half of the day, and the girl for the other, so as to make sure against their being too hard-worked.

Poor Mary Silifant's was a very different case. She *was* a forlorn little unit. Her father did carry her part of the way to the brickyard—it was nearly a mile from her home—but, once there, he had neither the will nor the power to protect her any further. He went off to his work in another part of the yard, and left her in the midst of a gang of strange children, all bigger than herself, who scoffed at her for a baby, and asked whatever use was she going to be. Bullying little children is not common in the brickyards; the women and girls take them very much under their protection, and besides, by the arrangement to which I have alluded, almost every child has some one

specially belonging to it to take its part; but where a little creature of five is so utterly feeble and defenceless as Mary was, it is almost too much to expect that in such a place as a brickyard *no one* will be found to take advantage of it, and the poor child was very, very miserable for the first few days.

There was a big lad named Peter Bond, who was endowed with that peculiar disposition to torment and persecute the weak, which I really think is about the worst, as it is the most repulsive, of all the evil tendencies with which poor human nature is cursed. Mary's feebleness was in itself a temptation to this youth; and when he found that she was such a poor little coward that nothing was easier than to torture her through her fears, he began at once to amuse himself with making her supremely wretched.

One day—happily, it was towards the end of the week—he had driven her up into a corner during the dinner hour, and was enjoying the sight of her terror whilst he ran at her with a barrow. He would drive at her apparently at full speed, and pull up short just before he reached her, or else dash into the bank on one side of her, whilst, with one or two kindred spirits, he indulged in shouts of laughter at her feeble struggles to get away, and her sobbing entreaties that he would let her go.

Just at this moment Jem Basley happened to pass by, and, perceiving that Peter Bond and Co. were tormenting somebody or something, made to the rescue, his being a nature which was the exact reverse of

theirs, for his heart grew hot within him at the mere sight of cruelty or oppression.

He was not ten years old, and Peter was past twelve; but then, as Peter well knew, he was backed by public opinion, and had but to give a hint to one of the men to get a bully a thrashing. For most of the men were fathers, and anything like ill-treatment of little children was a thing utterly abhorred and discountenanced amongst them. So when Jem demanded, "Hallo, Peter, what are you a-doin' of to that little maid?" Peter sulkily desisted, just as he had drawn up his barrow for a charge, and growled in a hoarse, throat-voice,—

"I ain't a-doin' nothin' to her,—little fool!"

The hunted child took advantage of this moment's pause to make her escape with the trembling speed of terror, and, seeing this, Jem merely added,—

"For shame to yourself, you great big bully, a-frightenin' a baby like that," and walked off after her, leaving Peter and his friends looking rather crestfallen and ashamed.

Mary had crouched down close to a knot of men who were eating their dinners not far off, and was comforting herself with a little silent crying. She had such a dread of boys that she began to tremble again when Jem came up to her, but he sat down by her and took her on his knee, with the tenderness of a lad accustomed to little brothers and sisters; and asked her, "What were yon chap doin' to 'ee, then?"

"A-runnin' at me wi' his barrow," answered Mary, in a lamentable voice, broken with a sob.

"Well, don't 'ee cry; he ain't goin' to do it no more."

"Oh, he will, he will," sobbed the child; "he's always a-doin' somethin' or other to me."

"A cowardly *beast*," said Jem, emphatically. "Haven't 'ee got no one to take your part?"

Mary shook her head.

"Oh, ay, I know. You be John Silifant's little maid? I heard 'em tellin' as how you was the smallest child in the yard. Well, look here, you do work in Millar's gang, don't you? Would 'ee like to get changed into *Father's* gang, an' then *I'll* take your part."

The forlorn child threw her arms impetuously round his neck and kissed him.

"Oh, yes! Oh, do get me changed!" she cried, "and then I'll love you for ever and ever."

Jem put her down rather quickly. He was afraid somebody might be looking, and might laugh; nobody was, however; so, instead of getting up and walking away, he went on talking to her. She was so small she could not yet quite talk plain. Jem thought her babyish pronunciation very pretty and "enticin'."

"Have 'ee eat your dinner?" he asked.

Mary looked uncomfortable. "No," she answered, under her breath.

"Why, how's that? Dinner hour's all but up."

"—— took it." Mary supplied the missing nominative with a mysterious nod.

"What, *Peter?*—oh, won't I give it him!"

Mary started up, and caught hold of his sleeve.

"Oh don't! Don't let him know I told! I ain't hungry, I ain't indeed! And he'd half kill I. Oh, promise you won't say nothin' to him about it."

Jem promised, to check the burst of sobs that followed, but muttered between his teeth, "I'll be even with him some day, though." And so he was, for he went off to the girls of his father's gang, to see if he could beg a piece of bread and cheese for his little *protégée*, and excited much feminine wrath and pity by telling them the whole story, which thereby spread through the yard, and Peter found himself for many a long day incessantly saluted and irritated by such questions as, "Who bullies babies?"—"Who stole little Poll Silifant's dinner?"—whilst Mary's remark, "He runned at me wi' a barrow," procured him the nickname of Mad Bull, which stuck to him through life, and was the greater annoyance to him because he had no opportunities of revenge, for the transfer of Mary's services was easily arranged, and she left Millar's gang for Basley's on the following Monday.

Jem Basley continued to be her fast friend from that time forwards, and kept his word about taking her part. He was a tender-hearted boy, and liked to have some one to pet or protect, and she reminded him of the small sister he used to be set to nurse before he was old enough to go out to work. That small sister was now just about Mary's age, and was learning to tell her letters, and use her needle, at the Infant School, whilst her poor little contemporary, no older and no bigger, was working thirteen hours a day in the brickyard. It was not hard work in itself

to stand about and hand dabs of wet clay, but the day was a long one for a young child, and she felt the loss of her morning's sleep, and often, although she was somewhat spared and favoured in consideration of her being so very young, she could not help crying with weariness all the way home, and sometimes scarcely cared to eat her supper, she was so over-fatigued.

It is only during the warmer months that children are employed in the brickyards. All through the winter there is nothing for them to do, and the better sort of parents take advantage of it to give them a little schooling. Jem was never allowed to miss a single week, but no one thought of such a thing for Mary; she was employed in minding her stepmother's baby instead. She was terribly sorry when the brick-yard work was over to think that she should not see her friend Jem again for many months, and sometimes she contrived to carry the baby as far as a certain corner, where she had a chance of a glimpse of him on his way from school in the afternoon. She was full of delight when she saw him one day, but, alas! Jem was rather ashamed of her, she looked such a ragged little object out of the brickfield, and some of his companions were with him; so he passed her by without any notice.

Mary was much hurt, and thought in her proud little heart that she would never go and watch for him again; nevertheless, weeks afterwards, she did find her way to the same spot, and hid round a corner, intending to see without being seen. And Jem came

dashing round the corner, almost on the top of her, and *did* see her, and called out, "Hallo, little un, how be you gettin' on?" and wanted to know if she was coming into the brickyard again in the spring, which made poor little Polly happy for many a long day afterwards.

Except on these two occasions she never chanced to see him until they met again in the brickyard, and Jem, who had outgrown "dab carrying," and was promoted to be a "barrow-loader," resumed his old habit of taking notice of her, and patronising her—looking well after her, too, in his boyish way, for once or twice when she lisped out certain naughty expressions only too familiar to her young ears, both at home and in the yard, Jem sharply ordered her never to let such words out of her mouth again.

"They ain't fit for little maids," said the boy, who, it must be confessed, was not too good to use the identical expressions himself sometimes, out of would-be manliness, "an' you be a bad gell to say any such. I 'ont love 'ee no more if you do."

"You be a very unkind boy," sobbed Mary; but nobody ever heard her say the offending words again.

Years went by, and each year, as the brickmaking season came round, the friendship between these two children was renewed and strengthened. By and by, when Mary had grown into a big girl, able to wheel her own barrow, and do as vigorous a day's work as any *boy* of her age in the yard, and Jem had long ceased to wait on the brickmakers, and was employed in different and better-paid labour, the old friendship

was not broken off but softened and changed into a tenderer feeling, and soon after Mary was fifteen years old they began seriously to keep company together.

In the days of which I write, the feeling which now exists against employing young girls just entering womanhood, in field labour, was only just beginning to work. The Basleys, indeed, who considered themselves superior people, and who were very well-to-do for their station in life, brought up their daughters to scorn the idea of working in the brickyard as a thing quite beneath them, and now and then other parents were found, far poorer than the Basleys, who nevertheless set their faces against putting their girls to such employment; but as a general rule, most of the people connected with the brickyards looked upon such work as the natural and matter-of-course portion of their children, girls as well as boys. The only drawback was, that whilst the boys grew up to earn the usual workman's wages, the very utmost that a grown-up girl could earn was so small a sum that it hardly sufficed to keep her, except where a large family living at home all threw their earnings into a common stock. And at the same time the brickyard work hardly ever failed to unfit girls more or less for every feminine occupation. The habit of working in the open air in company with men and boys often made them forward and unrestrained in manner; the rough nature of their work deadened their perceptions of the niceties of domestic life—woman's natural sphere; its desultory character made them impatient of regularity and monotony; and the comparative

independence of brickyard life rendered them very insubordinate and reluctant to submit to control.

The consequence was, it was not easy for them to find any other way of earning their living. It was difficult to get any one to engage them as servants, they were usually ignorant of every branch of needlework, and in fact were incompetent for any except the roughest and worst-paid kinds of employment.

Those girls were especially unfortunate who had nothing in their homes to counteract the influence of the brickyard; and such was the case with poor Mary Silifant. Her home was as unsatisfactory as it could well be, and but for Jem Basley there is no saying how she might have turned out; but her value for Jem's good opinion made her strive earnestly to maintain a character for steadiness and industry. He was to her the embodiment of worth and goodness; and, out of his accidental talk of his home, Mary had constructed an ideal into harmony with which she was incessantly aiming to bring herself.

Such was her difficulty in finding any other means of earning her living that it was not until she was considerably past sixteen that she ceased to work in the brickyard. She wished very much to go out to service, but could not find anyone willing to take her, except at a low public-house, a situation not at all in accordance with her views, but which her stepmother was very angry with her for refusing, as it would have kept her through the winter. Mary, however, knew how much her going there would annoy Jem, and held

out against it; and, at last, she had the good fortune to meet with a better place.

One of the things that Mary had caught up from Jem was a desire for schooling, and for about two years past she had taken to attending a Sunday-school whenever she was not kept at home through lack of suitable clothes. Her primæval ignorance was very great. She was accustomed to say the Lord's Prayer night and morning, because it had been taught her almost as soon as she could speak, by her own mother, but she had no idea of its meaning; and she had also heard of the name of Jesus Christ, and dimly associated it with heaven and goodness, but beyond this she knew nothing of the simplest truths of Christianity. For some time she was unfortunate in her teacher. First truths are by no means the easiest truths to teach; and Miss Smith, a well-disposed young dressmaker, who taught Mary's class, only puzzled her by religious phraseology to which she did not possess the key. But, by and by, a certain Mrs. Browne took the class, and then very soon light began to break in upon Mary. She profited, too, in other ways by the change. Mrs. Browne was an excellent woman, and very thorough-going in all that she did. The next time Mary was obliged to stay at home—because her old bonnet had irreparably come to pieces—Mrs. Browne came to see what had become of her, and perceiving her poverty, said, she "thought she knew a lady who might give her a left-off bonnet." The left-off bonnet was accompanied by a left-off dress and an old pair of boots——

"Mamma," the young lady who had bestowed them had said, "I asked Mrs. Browne the other day if she knew anybody who would like my old bonnet, and she is going to send up a brickyard girl: don't you think I might give her a dress too—that horrible brown thing I should be so glad to see the last of?"

And Mamma had consented, and the receipt of the "horrible brown thing" had caused Mary Silifant's heart to beat fast with delight, for it was the only gown she had ever possessed that it was possible to wear on Sundays without feeling ashamed or shabby, and the first time she put it on the foolish little thing almost cried for pleasure.

Mrs. Browne was a grocer's wife. She was not rich, and the greater part of her time was absorbed in household and family duties; such leisure as she did possess was given freely and ungrudgingly to God and the poor, with many an honest regret that the gift was such a small one. She was well known amongst the clergy and the ladies of Arleigh as a person who would take painful trouble to inquire into disagreeable cases; who would never shrink from visiting any house or alley, however low and wretched, wherein a fellow-creature needed her help; and who accepted, not merely patiently, but gratefully, such portions as might be allotted to her of the tiresome drudgery in the way of distributing local charities which must be done by somebody, but which is not always easy to find somebody to do.

The school which Mary Silifant attended was a sort of Ragged School, opened in a cottage in the most

neglected district in the town, by a few friends of small means and modest station, whose hearts had been struck with pity for the troops of untaught children that abounded there. It was not called a Ragged School,—that name had not been invented,—it was simply spoken of amongst themselves as the school in Parker's Alley; but it was very much the wish of those who started it to catch the ragged children, and to a great extent they succeeded, though they always found that whatever might be their normal condition nothing would induce them actually to come in *rags*: the possession of Sunday garments was an essential preliminary to coming even to this very unpretending Sunday-school.

When the promoters of it first asked Mrs. Browne to help them, she said regretfully, that she feared she could not, but afterwards she wrote that, on thinking the matter over, she thought she might give her afternoons, whereupon a certain number of great ignorant girls like Mary were selected, and formed into a class especially for her.

"'Tis very important to get hold of them girls," said the superintendent, "and I think Miss Smith ain't hardly equal to it."

He was a baker, this superintendent—a middle-aged man, with a large family; and he was in the habit of speaking with a strong local accent, and somewhat ungrammatically. He was not a bit like a gentleman or a hero; he was of his station *stationary*, limited in his education, limited in his opportunities, limited in his ideas, no large-souled, exceptional nature,

but simply a common-place little man, with a very genuine belief in the truths of Christianity. Religion had elevated his soul, and widened his sympathies, but it had not altered his nature, any more than it had altered the colour of his hair, or the shape of his nose. And being such as he was he did a great deal of good in his generation; there are many men richer, better born, better bred, better endowed both mentally and physically, who do far less, and will be, on the whole, less missed in the world when they die.

Mrs. Browne was painfully struck with the ignorance of her scholars, and she was still more painfully struck with their lack of womanliness, their loud voices and rough movements, and the general coarseness of their appearance. It grieved her to think what wives and mothers these poor girls would make, and lying awake at night,—for her health was not very good, and she was a light sleeper,—she considered in the silence and darkness what she could do to civilize and, if possible, Christianize them. If Miss Grey, the ironmonger's daughter, would help her, she thought she might manage to let them come once a week to her house to be taught reading and writing. That would be something, though little enough. And then if any of them showed a disposition to profit by teaching, and to submit to a regular indoor life, she would try to get them to go to service, and find places for them. Many ladies she knew would give assistance in fitting them out with the necessary clothes, and she would go into the shop on market-days and see if she could hear of any farmers' wives wanting

servants who would consent to be troubled with such rough girls. There was a good deal of out-of-door work connected with farm service, and it seemed to her more likely to suit her *protégées* than any other.

Mary Silifant engaged her interest from the first. The girl's anxiety to improve was so evident, and, though her appearance was rough to a degree, her voice was softer and her manner more gentle than that of any of the others; she heard too, on making inquiry, that Mary was spoken of as "a good, honest maid," who had "kept herself respectable" amidst all the temptations of brickyard life. Accordingly she took great pains with her, and Mary, poor girl, took great pains in return. But it is not easy to *begin* to learn at sixteen. It really seemed as if the doors of the intellect had grown so rusty with disuse that they could not be forced open even to take in the alphabet. The connection between learning to distinguish the queer little black shapes called letters, and the art of reading out of books, never dawned upon her; and though, with blind trust in her teacher, she did her very best to fix the names and the appearance of the aforesaid black shapes in her memory, they all seemed to her so much alike that she never could distinguish them apart. During one entire winter she never succeeded in mastering the difference between B and D, and C and G, and, though liking the girl very much, and touched by her patience and humility, Mrs. Browne began to despair that she ever would. One day she asked Mary if she was going into the brickyard again.

"I'd like not to," the girl answered. "I'd like to go out to service an' learn what belongs to a house—but no one won't take me."

Then Mrs. Browne exerted herself, and procured Mary the offer of an excellent place in farm service. She was much disappointed, and a little offended, when the girl refused it; and not entirely satisfied when she extracted the reason, viz. that "Jem" had made her promise not to go out of his reach.

"You're very young to be keeping company with anybody," said Mrs. Browne; "and even if the young man is respectable and steady—as I daresay he is—I hope you would not think of marrying till you are older."

"Oh no, ma'am, I daresay we shan't be able to marry for several years. An' I do want so to learn what belongs to a house first."

Mrs. Browne knew pretty well how little opportunity Mary had of learning "what belongs to a house" at home; she took compassion on the girl, and with some difficulty found her another situation in Arleigh itself. When, however, Mary was dismissed at the end of the first month as too rough and ignorant to be even worth teaching; when she threw up her next place in a foolish fit of independence because she fancied herself put upon, and resented being obliged to be at home by a certain fixed hour when she went out on Sundays; and when, moreover, conscious of having acted hastily, and with a provoking disregard of all the trouble that had been taken to find her a situation, she kept carefully out of her kind friend's

way; and when actually sent for to be "spoken to," went reluctantly, and opposed no other defence than a clumsy, unmannerly silence to all that was said to her; Mrs. Browne lost hope, and came to the conclusion that poor Mary had been so thoroughly hardened and roughened by her brickyard life as to be really incapable for any sort of domestic service.

"And yet she will be a wife and a mother some of these days," said Mrs. Browne, with a sigh. "And what a wife and mother! Well, if *they'd* listen to me (I don't mean to say anybody would, and 'tisn't my place to speak), they'd make a law against girls being put to work in the brickfields; 'tis the ruin of half of them."

"Ah, my dear," her husband answered, "if you was in Parliament there'd be wonderful laws!"

For it must be confessed that Mr. Browne considered many of his wife's views decidedly Utopian, though at the same time he had a great respect for herself, and generally gave willing aid to any of her plans as far as it was in his power to do so.

After this Mrs. Browne lost sight of Mary. She had told her that she could not recommend her again, and when the girl, after much discouragement, succeeded in finding a fresh situation for herself, she was too full of the idea of having offended Mrs. Browne to make bold to go and tell her so. Of her marriage she felt still less inclined to inform her, for Mrs. Browne had said that she hoped she would not marry for several years, and she did not care to be told she was acting foolishly.

PART III.

MARRIED.

"Honeymoon once over,
What if I should scan
Less with eye of lover
Than of mortal man?"
Author of "John Halifax."

It happened that about this time Mary Graham, the eldest daughter of the great brick manufacturer, was about to be married to Mr. Alfred Champion, the banker. It was an excellent match, and both families were in great good humour about it, and all sorts of festivities were to take place in honour of the occasion. Amongst other things the brickyard people were to have a holiday, and to have a great supper in the evening, and our young couple took it into their heads that Miss Graham's wedding-day would be a fine day to select for their own marriage. Gentlefolk were always married so late that their own humble union would be celebrated nearly two hours before the church was wanted for the grander party.

So Mary and Jem were the first to pass under the arch of white roses woven over the churchyard gate in honour of the other couple who were to succeed them, and theirs was the earliest freshness of the ferns and white lilies with which the chancel in which they exchanged their vows was decorated. The mottoes, too, that met the eye here and there, were not

less appropriate to the one bridal than to the other; and Jem and Mary, who were simple enough to be made happy with a very small matter, took not a little pride and pleasure in this modest share that accident allotted to them in the splendours of other people. When, an hour and a half later, they heard the bells strike up, as the other bride and bridegroom came out of church, Jem nudged Mary, and Mary nodded and smiled at Jem. "I reckon they bells is ringin' for we as well as that other lot," chuckled Jem; "I wonder what Mrs. Champion 'ould say if she knowed there was another bride did went under thik handsome arch, afore ever she did!"

And the two young people stopped and listened to the bells with great satisfaction.

I doubt if Mr. and Mrs. Alfred Champion, who went through a wedding breakfast with speeches, and afterwards travelled by express to Dover, on their way to the Continent, enjoyed their wedding day more than Jem and Mary, if as much. Jem told Mary quite sincerely, that evening, that it had been the happiest day of his life; whilst Mr. Alfred Champion heaved a deep sigh, and fervently expressed to *his* wife his thankfulness that it was over.

But then Jem and Mary had to compress into one day their entire wedding tour, and one man's pleasure is sometimes another man's purgatory. I think the Alfred Champions would have been terribly tired by such holiday-making as theirs. First they paraded a little about the streets in company with the bridesmaid and groomsman, who had been the only friends

present at their marriage. It is not very customary in their rank of life for the parents on either side to go to church with the bridal party. I have even heard that there is a superstitious fancy that it is unlucky for anyone older than the bridegroom to be present.

Then they went for a walk. It was the stereotyped thing to do, and there was a tolerably high hill about a mile from Arleigh, with a fine view from the top of it, which was the usual walk selected on such occasions. Jem and the friend he had asked to be his groomsman cut their companions' initials in a deserted quarry where they rested, and then the little party adjourned to a small old-fashioned public-house, bearing a strange old sign—the Four Alls. The parties who frequented the house thought it meant the four *awls*, and did not trouble themselves to connect the name of the inn with the painting in four compartments that hung outside it, whereon were dimly discernible the faded and obscure portraitures of the following personages: a king, a soldier, a labourer, and a clergyman, once intended to suggest that the king rules all, the soldier fights for all, the labourer digs for all, and the priest prays for all. There our young people had some refreshment, and then turned back into the town again, as it was drawing near their early dinner hour, and there was a feast prepared for them at the house of Mary's father.

A very humble and scanty feast it was, though, with true politeness, nobody betrayed the least consciousness of any deficiencies, and indeed, poor as it

was, Mary's stepmother had done her best. She was an untidy, sharp-tempered woman, rather given to drinking, and during her stepdaughter's childhood had generally neglected, and occasionally ill-used her; but, for all that, she liked her well enough to be glad that she was going to make a respectable marriage, and to consider that it was only the girl's due to show her and her husband some hospitality on their wedding day. It is not, however, an easy thing to put a house that is habitually slovenly and forlorn into a fit state to receive company. Sarah Silifant had made violent exertions. She had whitewashed the walls of her cottage, and arrayed her dirty person in a clean gown and a new cap; but nothing could conceal the general bareness and discomfort of the place, and but for the hearty good temper of the guests, and their courteous ignoring of all shortcomings, the entertainment must have been a decided failure. However, John Silifant, when sober, was not at all a bad companion, and he had hospitable instincts which led him to be so on the present occasion. He could tell a good story, and sing a good song, though in rather a quavering voice; and Jem, who had disliked and despised him all his life, was surprised to find how fast time could fly in his society.

More eating and drinking followed. Eating and drinking passes away the time, and constitutes something to look forward to when uneducated people, accustomed to have their time filled up with regular work, find themselves with the blissful burden of an unemployed day on their hands; so there is generally

as much of it as the means of the people concerned will allow. The meal at the Silifants was prolonged as late as possible, so as to have only a short interval to be disposed of before the wedding-party could proceed to the Basleys, where they were invited to take tea, and where the spotless neatness and solid comfort of every arrangement made poor Mary's heart sink at the contrast it presented to everything they had seen at her father's cottage, and at the thought that *this* was what Jem was accustomed to. She felt very shy and frightened; and, as she returned thanks for the various presents which awaited her from every member of the family, she felt almost disposed to cry at the mortification of having none to tell of from her own people, with the exception of a cake given her by her late mistress, the baker's wife, which had figured on her stepmother's dinner-table, and a couple of ugly chimney ornaments from her bridesmaid.

The day concluded with the supper given by Mr. Graham to his workpeople. Mary had never seen anything in the least like it, and was all but struck dumb with admiration. The banquet was held in a tent decorated with garlands and brightly illuminated, for daylight was just beginning to wane a little when the company sat down; and the multitude of lights, the long tables with their white drapery, adorned with flowers, and covered with an abundance of handsome and plentiful fare, though just what is usual on such occasions, seemed to her unparalleled and inconceivable magnificence. She trembled all over, and felt a curious spasm in the throat, just as if she were

going to cry; and when she found herself, she hardly knew how, seated next her husband amongst a party of his friends and relations at the lower end of one of the tables, she clutched Jem's arm very tight, and whispered,—

"Ain't it just like heaven?"

"'Tis uncommon handsome," said Jem, admiringly, but much less excited; "Grahams do always do things handsome."

"'Tis a very pretty spread—as pretty a spread as ever I see," declared Jem's uncle, Thomas Basley, who sat near them. "I mind the doin's when Mr. Graham as now is brought his lady home. There was a supper give to the brickyard folk *then*, an' I do seem this un's every bit as fine a one."

"By the way, uncle, where was Jess to this afternoon? I didn' see her up to our place."

"Whimsey maid! She's always a takin' of summat or nother into her head. She's gone off on a sudden to visit her Aunt Kezia. Mother did want for she to take her ticket an' come to-night in her place, but she 'ouldn' bide. Nobbut what I be glad the mother should get a treat—she don't get one not so often as once in ten years—but . . . ."

Thomas Basley's remark was never concluded, for Jem touched his arm to warn him that Mr. Graham was preparing to say grace; and grace having been said, the clatter of knives and forks soon superseded conversation. To please her husband, Mary tried very hard to seem to get through what was placed before her, but she could hardly touch anything.

The novelty and splendour of the scene were too much for her, and completely took away her appetite. Moreover, she was naturally a little tired and excited after a long day, spent in a totally unaccustomed manner, and her wedding-day into the bargain; and as she sat by Jem's side, fidgeting with her ring, and turning it round and round her finger, hardly ever speaking, except to refuse the offers to refill her plate with which she was ever and anon assailed, but that Jem was manifestly enjoying himself, she would have longed to have it all over, and to be walking "*home*" with him to the scantily-furnished cottage in which they were to begin life together. It was not that either she or Jem felt any sentimental reluctance to go to a public supper on the evening of their wedding-day, but simply that it had all been a little too much for Mary, and she felt a little bit overcome—"dull and foolish" she herself would have called it.

At last the end came. Speeches had been made, healths drunk, and cheers given, and the band began to play "God save the Queen," whilst the whole party poured out of the tent into the cool night air. Mr. Graham, with some of his family and one or two of the most responsible men in his employ, stood near one of the openings, and watched the people stream forth. The overseer of the brickyard noticed Jem and Mary in the crowd, and turned round and said a few words to his employer.

"What, married this morning! Stop a minute, young man!" exclaimed Mr. Graham, and several people caught hold of Jem and told him "the master"

was speaking to him, and there was a little check in the crowd whilst Jem, with Mary on his arm, turned back into the tent.

"So this is your wedding-day as well," said Mr. Graham to Mary, whilst he poured out a glass of wine; "I must congratulate you both, and drink your health, and I hope all the pleasant wishes that have been made for the health and happiness of my daughter and her husband will come true for you two also."

Then he wished them good-night, and put a sovereign into Jem's hand, a very welcome addition to the extremely scanty funds with which these two young people began housekeeping. As they walked home through the gas-lit streets to the quiet little court in which they were to live, they consulted eagerly how to spend it, so as to make it go farthest in adding to their small stock of furniture; and poor little new-married Mary's heart gave a sudden throb when Jem delivered over the money to her, and told her to take care of it, for, in their rank of life, it is always the wife who takes care of the purse, and this little commonplace action touched some hidden nerve of feeling, and seemed to whisper to her, "Wake up, Mary, you are not dreaming. You are really Jem's wife. Now, henceforward, it is you that will have to lay out his earnings every week, and keep his clothes mended, and do for him. All his home comfort will depend upon nobody else but you."

"You be tired, little un," said Jem, not in the least guessing what the thoughts were that made his bride's face look so grave and soft as he led her through the

doorway of their humble home. "Why, my darlin', you be cryin'!"

"No, I bain't," Mary retorted hastily, notwithstanding that there was a suspicious brightness in her eyes, for she knew that men, and especially her Jem, hated to see women cry.

No young wife ever entered a husband's house with a more earnest desire to do her duty and make him happy than Mary had; no brighter dream of mutual happiness ever gladdened the imagination of any bride than the vision of her future home with Jem, which Mary had cherished ever since she left childhood behind her. And for a little while, during a honeymoon of three months or so, she found her visions almost perfectly realized. In the new delight of having her for his wife Jem was not at all disposed to be critical about her management, and indeed her household cares were at first so simple that it was hardly possible to fail in their accomplishment. Besides, in those early days, if she did happen to forget some little matter, or to do anything particularly stupid, Jem only laughed over it, and told her not to mind, she would do better in time.

But, by degrees, Mary's little duties accumulated, and her various little negligences became more and more perceptible. There is an old proverb which says, "If wishes were horses, beggars would ride." Mary's wishes to make her husband's home comfortable were very ardent, but she could not wish away her ignorance, and clumsiness, and inexperience. For example, when she first married, Jem's wardrobe came

under her hands in a state of the most perfect repair, mended and patched by the clever fingers of his mother; but, as everyone knows, clothes will not remain in repair without constant attention. Mary was so accustomed to rags, that it never occurred to her to put in the stitch in time that saves nine; and when rents and holes began to appear, very often she did not mend them until Jem himself noticed and complained of them, and then even a masculine eye could see the difference between her wretched cobbles and the careful mother's neat darns. In her own dress, too, she had very little notion of trying to look nice on common working days, whilst Jem had been accustomed to see his mother and sisters invariably neat, and as regards the latter, a little smart even, when he returned from work of an evening. Perhaps you think that as he had wooed Mary in her rough brick-yard dress he need not have cared, but home attire was a different matter, and his wife's slovenliness was a daily offence to his taste. Poor Mary had never realized the desirability of being clean on week-days. In her secret soul she thought it rather an unreasonable whim of Jem's to want her to do daily what she had been accustomed to think it quite enough to do weekly. But the tact of love soon made her aware that he was not pleased to find her in a dirty dress when he came in from work, and she accordingly began a wholesome practice of "cleaning herself," as she called it, every afternoon. Jem was pleased, and complimented her on her looks once or twice, but it soon became a matter of course to him to find her

neat, and he ceased to take notice, and then Mary began to think he did not care, and dropped back, on all sorts of little excuses, into the old indifference to looking well except on Sundays, which was so habitual as to be like a second nature.

Jem was so much in love with her when they married that it was a long time before he began to find fault with anything she did. If any particular instance of bad management forced itself on his notice, he used to think that Mary's inexperience alone was to blame; give her a little time to get used to things, and all would come right. But Jem's stock of patience was far from inexhaustible, and we have already seen that his temper inclined to fault-finding and irritability, and, in a matter where his own personal comfort suffered constantly, his forbearance was not long to be relied on.

A perpetual jarring of discordant tempers had marred all household happiness in his father's house; and he had thought, and indeed had not refrained from saying, when people told him that Mary would prove a bad housekeeper, that he did not care for housekeeping: what he cared for was his girl's sweet temper—all the better if she was not so very particular; he should not be plagued out of his life about bringing dirt into a house! But whilst he said and thought this, he had not in reality the least idea of what domestic discomfort would practically be, and when he found it out by experience he learnt to appreciate his mother's orderly management for the first time in his life, and after a while he began incessantly to quote

his mother's ways to Mary, and to "wonder" in a tone of ever-increasing complaint why his wife's "ways" were so different.

It would take too long to trace how, little by little, the fondness and patience of the young bridegroom became merged into the loudly-expressed annoyance and dissatisfaction of the irritated husband. Poor Mary's untidy habits and want of management seemed more and more provoking every day, when once the Rubicon had been crossed, and Jem had allowed himself for the first time to find fault with her sharply and angrily. For a short time, when their first child was born, she was made happy by a renewal of his old tenderness, but it did not last long. The baby's birth increased her cares, and with fresh duties brought fresh failures, and fresh occasions for blame. As years went by Jem fell into a habit of chronic fault-finding, which hardly ever allowed him to see anything to approve in anything she said or did. And yet his conscience seldom reproached him for being unkind to his wife. He had a rooted conviction that he had done her a great favour by marrying her, and she was in luck to have so good a husband. He never beat or ill-used her; he never blamed her unless she richly deserved it; and if he spent some of his earnings at the public-house, it was she that drove him to it by making him such an uncomfortable home! Mary acquiesced. She was utterly loyal to her husband, and never admitted even to herself that he was harsh to her; she threw all the blame on her own faults, and opposed no other defence than tears to the con-

stant scolding with which she was visited. And she would have given a great deal for the power of restraining even those tears, for they always increased her husband's anger; but they *would* come, and try as she would she could not check them. She quite believed that she was a fortunate woman to be Jem's wife, and blamed no one but herself that she was not happy.

And yet through all those years patient Mary Basley had merited praise rather than reproach, even for her much vituperated household management. Her husband, who noticed only the faults, missed seeing it; but not the less, month by month, and year by year, there was steady, though slow, improvement. "Success" *generally* "crowns effort," though often after long delay; and Mary, disheartened and dispirited as she not seldom was, never ceased struggling and toiling, except now and then during short intervals of utter discouragement, to be the good housewife she had resolved to become when she first married. During ten years nine children were born to her, of whom she lost three by death. Besides the inevitable burdens of motherhood to such a family, she had from time to time sickness, hard winters, or bad times to contend with; and whatever she had to bear was certainly not made lighter by a husband who was apt to think it was always her fault when anything went wrong; and yet she who, when they first married, had utterly failed and broken down, now, when her duties had become heavier and far more complicated, fulfilled them, on the whole, in a

way that left little just cause of complaint to her husband. But he had become habituated to grumbling, and went on grumbling accordingly, only cheering her heart from time to time by letting drop on rare occasions some accidental word of kindness, at once caught up, however short or grudging it might be, and enshrined in the fondest nook of her faithful memory as a token that, however he might blame her sometimes, he loved her still in his heart.

PART IV.

GATHERING CLOUDS.

> "Good heed she took of all his moody ways,
> And how he loved her not as in past days,
> And how he shrunk from her, yet knew it not,
> She noted." MORRIS.

"Mary," said her husband one evening, breaking a long silence, during which he had been eating his supper, whilst Mary was busy over her never-ending task of mending and patching the clothes of her six children, "who do 'ee think is a-goin' to take the middle house?"

She looked up timidly, for she hated to be asked a question. If she answered wrong, Jem would be vexed or perhaps call her a fool; and if she did not answer at all, Jem would be equally vexed, and probably complain of her being dull.

"I don't know, I'm sure," she began, hesitating, yet ever pleased when Jem condescended to talk to her,

and anxious not to seem uninterested; "is it the Binkses?"

"Binkses!" ejaculated Jem, contemptuously, "that's you all over; that is! What 'ould Binks do wi' such a house? All the furniture he've got 'ouldn't fill two rooms. Nobody but a fool 'ould ha' thought o' such a thing."

"I'm sure I couldn't think whoever it could be," pleaded Mary.

"Well, do 'ee remember my cousin, Jess Basley?"

"Oh, ah, that I do. A tall girl wi' black eyes. I remember how handsome I did think her, Jem, when I see her the first time, about a month afore we was married, an' how I did wish I could ha' been as fine as she was, Sundays?"

She stopped and sighed, for a sudden recollection came to her of Jem's being struck with the contrast her homely dress presented to Jessie's gay attire, and of the tears she had shed over the matter. Perhaps Jem, too, was visited with some softened recollection of those dear old courting days, and of the bright eager face that used to welcome him, when he came to fetch his sweetheart for their weekly walk together, for he said—

"Handsome, were she? Ay, I suppose she were. But I know I couldn' abide her in them days. Aunt an' mother did want for she an' I to keep company, an' was always a-throwin' of her at my head—enough to sicken a chap of a girl anyhow, even if so be I'd liked Jessie's forward, flirtin' ways, which I never didn't. An' as to keepin' company, they knowed well enough

who I was keepin' company with. An' wi' all her smart clothes she didn't never look one-half so nice as you did."

"Ah, those was happy days, Jem! If 'twasn't for the dear children I could wish myself back in 'em. I didn't envy no one's lot in those days."

"An' whose lot do 'ee envy now?" asked her husband sharply.

"Oh, no one's! 'Twere only a way of speakin'. Not no one's!—if 'tisn't that, maybe sometimes I *do* envy them that's very good managers."

"That's stuff, Mary, an' you do know it! Any woman can be a good manager as do take the pains to be industrious an' careful."

Mary sighed, and her heart swelled. She knew well what it was to take pains, but she did not say so. To cry would have been to displease her husband very seriously, and she was not sure she could speak without crying. She was not in very robust health just then, and self-command was not easy. So she chided herself for being foolish, and was silent.

"Well," continued Jem, after a little pause, "'tis Jessie Basley as is comin' to live in the middle house. Not Jessie Basley though she ain't no longer; she's married to old Hicks, the foreman at the foundry."

"Old Hicks?" Mary repeated in astonishment; "why, he's ever so old, ain't he?"

"Oh, ay, old enough. If Uncle Thomas was livin,' he'd be a younger man than his son-in-law, that he 'ould. He's a widower, but his childr'n is all grown

up. One of his daughters did use to do for him, but when she married he was forced to look out for a wife."

"How *could* Jessie marry him?"

"Why not? He's in uncommonly comfortable circum*stances*. An', besides, Jessie's none so young as she might be. She's a year or two older than I, that I know. 'Twas pretty nigh time for her to settle, if she didn' mean to be an old maid."

"Well, when I do remember her so gay an' so handsome, an' so saucy as she did seem to be to all her lovers, I can't hardly believe it."

"Oh, 'tis true enough, though. They've been married 'bout o' three months. I think 'tis odd Jessie didn' let none of our people know; but there, uncle an' aunt's dead, an' she's free to please herself. An', besides, she'd had a sort o' quarrel wi' mother along of a talkin' to mother gave her, 'bout a sad piece o' work there was when she left that situation she had at Northover. I heard of it quite accidental, this afternoon. An' look here, Mary, maybe Jessie do think she've made a grand marriage, an'll be high an' mighty, an' take no notice o' we. An' if 'tis so, why all we've got to do is to take no notice o' she; but if so be she *should* seem as if she did wish to be friendly wi' those that be akin to her, 'tis my desire that we should be friendly too. I don't see as I've any call to take up mother's quarrels. An' Jess is Uncle Tom's only daughter, an' poor Uncle Tom were always uncommon kind to I. So now you do know how I do wish you to act."

Mary nodded. "We shall soon see if she do wish to be friendly," she observed, not very warmly.

She had no objection whatever to her husband's desire that his family should be on good terms with his cousin; she thought it natural and right, but still she felt a vague uneasiness at Jessie's coming to live in the same court with themselves. Jem's family, and especially the female part of it, had uniformly treated her with so much disdain and superciliousness, that she could not help feeling some dislike to the idea of having one of them located at her very door, to observe and criticise all her doings, and perhaps to make Jem think even less of her than he did already.

She reflected, however, that she had never once seen Jessie since her marriage. Was it not unreasonable and unjust to conclude beforehand that she would be a painful neighbour? It was crying out before she was hurt, which was one of the things which Jem said she was always doing. She determined to put aside her fears, and welcome Jessie's arrival as her husband seemed to wish her to do, supposing that Jessie showed the slightest wish for welcome from her; but still she could not help cherishing a secret hope that, after all, something might turn up to prevent her coming.

The middle house was the roomiest and most convenient cottage in the court, and was let at a higher rent than any of the others. It was, consequently, generally occupied by a family of larger means and higher consideration than the rest, and its occupants generally took, as a matter of course, the leading position in that little world of some half-

dozen households. A blacksmith had had it last, a genial, kind-hearted man, who had been quite an authority and councillor-general amongst his neighbours. His departure left a social gap which old Hicks was not at all the person to fill; he was dull and self-important, and made it a sort of boast that he neither meddled nor made, by which he intended that he was utterly indifferent to the concerns of his neighbours. Jessie, who, in her waning youth, had deliberately set herself to attract him, and had plumed herself on making an eminently prudent and prosperous match, found herself involved in a life whose monotony wearied her very soul. Old Hicks had reached the age of habits. The slightest deviation from the daily groove irritated and annoyed him. Jessie found herself doomed to evenings which were so exasperatingly like each other that nothing but real affection could have made them endurable. She felt no affection for her husband, she even began to dislike him a little before they had been married many weeks, and the feeling did not decrease as time went on. She had not occupation enough to fill the long empty days, and her husband's society seemed to become more wearisome the more she thought about it; whilst, when she tried to console herself by her old habits of coquetry, he developed a talent for jealousy which was, to Jessie, as unexpected as it was disagreeable. She was a great coward, and from the moment that she first saw old Hicks in a frightful passion, and heard him threaten her and call her names, she took especial care never to let him see her do anything to

excite his wrath, and even found some interest in making it her business to learn how to manage him and keep him in a good temper; but to attract and engage admiration had been her chief amusement all through life, and she was not at all inclined to give it up. She said to herself that she did not mean any harm, and it was very hard if she might never have any fun at all now she was married; she was not going to give up amusing herself as she pleased for any old man in the world.

The removal to Freeman's Court was solely her husband's arrangement, with a view to get out of the way of some of the acquaintances he distrusted. The house was larger and better than their former one, which was the reason he gave Jessie for the change; and she smiled and approved, and let him think she did not see through his manœuvre, with fine feminine tact, of which she possessed and misused a considerable share.

When first she heard that Jem Basley lived in the same court she remembered all the aggravating things his mother had said to her on the memorable occasion when she had told Jessie that she felt it her duty to say a few words to her for her good; how she was to come to no good, and Jem's sisters were not to be allowed to associate with her unless she altered her ways! She pleased herself with the thought of looking down upon them all from her elevated position as a foreman's wife, whilst Jem's sisters had only married "common working men." Very respectable and well-to-do their husbands were, certainly; but still they

were not foremen, and neither of them could have afforded the dignity of the middle house in Freeman's Court. As to Jem, everyone knew that he had married a slatternly brickyard girl. No doubt she should find him in an untidy house, swarming with dirty children, looking broken down with work and worry, and with hardly a trace remaining of the smart young fellow about whom she had once been such a fool! For in the days of their youth Jessie had lost her heart to Jem, and had thought it very hard that, instead of giving her his in return, he had obstinately wasted it on Mary Silifant. It was not altogether her own fault. She had not seldom heard her mother and Jem's discuss the possibilities of a match between their children, and had acquired a notion that Jem was her property, whom she was to decide whether she would marry or not when she grew up. It was a bitter mortification to discover that he was insensible to all her attractions, and liked some one else. She made many covert attempts to win him away from his homely sweetheart, and when the marriage actually took place she left Arleigh to hide what a blow it was to her. Then she perversely insisted on going to service, and only visited home in the intervals between various places. In fact, she was thoroughly unsettled, and led a life of as much change and excitement as she could obtain, which, after her parents' death, became ever more and more unsatisfactory until her marriage.

Who knows whether some unconscious womanly instinct, warning her to avoid temptation and peril, did

not lie at the bottom of her half-formed resolve to treat Jem and his family with an air of distant superiority? Whether it were so or not the mood did not last long, but soon gave way to a fresh fancy that she might find some amusement in making pets of the children—supposing any of them to be worth petting—and that at any rate she should like to see if Jem was as fond as ever of his brickyard girl, and whether Mary was really such a "horrid bad manager" as she had the name of being in Jem's family. Accordingly Mary—who had been somewhat humiliated by the scornful way in which the small courtesies which, in compliance with her husband's wishes, she had offered on Jessie's first arrival in her new house, were not so much rejected as ignored, and had consequently told Jem that she thought Mrs. Hicks considered herself quite above having anything to do with them—was astonished one morning by finding one of her little girls with a bun in her hand, given her by the "person at the middle house," who, the child said, had told her to call her Cousin Jessie, and asked her for "one of her pretty curls."

"I hope you did thank her for her present," admonished Mary, a little sharply, "else she'll think I don't teach you no manners. An' don't you get your head stuffed full o' conceit, 'cause folk talks nonsense to 'ee 'bout them curls o' yours, or I'll cut 'em all off."

She was vexed at the child's complacent air, perplexed at the inconsistency of Mrs. Hicks's behaviour. Did she mean to make friends with her children, she wondered, whilst she turned the cold shoulder to their

mother? Because, if so, she was determined not to put up with it.

She had little idea of the inconstancy of Jessie's moods, or of the rapidity with which she passed from one extreme to another. Having tired of the notion of showing off her importance, she was taken with a sudden fancy for being intimate, and varying her dull life with the society of her cousins. Elizabeth Ann, the little girl with the curls, was a pretty child; would it be an amusement or a bore to adopt her? Jessie lazily wondered. She had no children of her own, and a little maid about the place would give her something to think of; whilst the parents were so "horrid poor," they would be glad enough to consent, and old Hicks would not make any difficulty, she was sure. Well! She would see a little more of the child, and turn it over in her mind; and, with a view to this, she threw her apron over her head to keep off the sun, and crossed the court, on the spur of the moment, to visit Mary, whom she surprised busy at the wash-tub, in a very untidy room, too much disconcerted at being so caught to give her visitor a very warm welcome.

But Jessie would not accept a repulse. Down she sat in the middle of the mess, and poured forth droll excuses for coming at such an untimely hour, talking as freely about her dulness at home, and her "old man's fidgets," as if Mary had been her confidant for years. Mary did not altogether approve of her tone, and it made her feel nervous to go on with her work, as Jessie insisted on her doing, under the observation

of those bright black eyes. However, Jessie could be irresistibly pleasant when she chose, and no mother's heart could hold out long against the cordial praise of the children into which she launched out. She was a born flatterer, for her nature was so excitable and impulsive, that into whatever she said and did she put an eagerness which gave it an air of being very genuine. It *was* genuine for the moment.

Mary was a very fond mother, and ready enough to believe, and to be gratified at the idea, that her children's superior charms had conquered Mrs. Hicks's heart, and inspired her with the sudden desire to assert her cousinhood with them which she now exhibited. She readily consented to let Elizabeth Ann spend the rest of the day at the middle house, and accepted and returned the parting embrace with which, much to her astonishment, Jessie favoured her, with as much warmth as she could, though, not being naturally addicted to such demonstrations, it went a little against the grain, and made her feel awkward and uncomfortable. And that kiss was, after all, the expression of intended rather than of actual good-will, for each of the two women was half-conscious of a secret aversion to the other. In Jessie, it was the relics of her ancient, unconquerable grudge against one, who, without knowing it, had been her successful rival; in Mary, it was that vague, indefinable sensation of distrust and dislike with which women like Jessie almost invariably inspire women like Mary. They cannot explain it to themselves; they often fight against it as an unjust prejudice of which

they ought to be ashamed; but there it is—nature's note of warning to bid Christabel beware of Geraldine.

Much intimacy followed the visit I have just described; but it was singular how very soon Jessie began to see very much more of Jem and the children than she did of Mary. Whenever they did meet, they had so little in common, that each thought the other's society painfully wearisome. Mary was such a mere house-mother, pre-occupied with the care of her children and her husband's comforts, and "such a fool," pronounced Jessie, that, "though she's for ever and ever at it, she don't make a good job of it after all." And Mary dreaded Jessie, fancied her inclined to be critical, and imagined or detected a sarcasm whenever she opened her lips. Nor did she like her husband to spend so much time as he did in Jessie's well-appointed house. It would make him so discontented even with the very best she could do for him, she feared.

At last the near neighbourhood of Mrs. Hicks worried and irritated her to such a degree, that she resolved to propose to her husband to move into another court, and with straightforward simplicity she added—

"Fact is, Jem, I don't ezackly take to your cousin Jessie, nor she don't to I, an' I think we'd both be comfor'bler if we didn' live quite so handy."

Great was her surprise when her husband turned upon her with fiercer anger than she had often seen in him.

"What! you be jealous, be you? I can't say a

civil word to one as near o' kin as Jessie is, 'thout you settin' up to be jealous. I'll give you summat to be jealous about if you don't look out."

Mary sat and looked at him so utterly aghast, that she had not a word to say.

"An' you've been showin' her your jealous airs, too," he continued, in the same loud indignant tone; "she told me she knowed you didn' like her, do what she would."

"Oh, Jem, how can you say such things!" cried poor Mary, with a quivering lip, "when no such thoughts ever entered into my head. An' I'm sure Mrs. Hicks have no call to say I don't like her: though I've reason enough not to now. . . . Settin' my own husband against me . . . ."

The too ready tears flowed down her cheeks, and a bitter sob broke from her.

"Jessie didn' say nothin' against you. She was only wishin' to be better friends," said Jem, more gently. "I wish you wouldn' always begin to cry whenever I do say a word to you. It do shut a fellow up so. I be sorry I spoke so rough, only it do drive a man mad when a woman's for ever plaguing him with senseless jealousy."

Mary laid her hand on her husband's shoulder as he sat over the fire, and bent down and kissed his forehead.

"I'd no thought o' bein' jealous," said she, gravely and steadily; "I do promise you I won't never be."

But it was a promise she could not keep. From that day forward for many months, until her torturing

doubts were exchanged for crushing certainty, the varied torments of jealousy gave her little rest, night or day. It was a very unfavourable year for the brick-making trade, work was slack even at the season that was usually the busiest, and the necessaries of life dear. Mary had a hard struggle to make both ends meet, and, do what she would, her husband had never seemed so uniformly dissatisfied with her. But it was not only with her that he was dissatisfied: his very life seemed to have become a burden to him. The sight of his children no longer seemed to give him pleasure. He complained of the noise they made, and pitied himself for having to toil to fill so many mouths. He seemed to take no interest in his work, and, whether in or out of employment, constantly regarded himself as ill-used. He was quarrelsome with his fellow-workmen, and, somehow or other, contrived to "have words" and establish a coolness between himself and all his chief intimates. He was little at home, and, when there, showed himself morose and taciturn. Poor Mary was completely wretched. That something was terribly wrong with her husband she felt assured; and, with a vague sense of impending evil that grew daily more unendurable, she connected that something with Jessie Hicks.

There are some people who when trouble is at hand feel a feverish eagerness for knowledge. They cannot rest until they *know the worst*, they say. But there are others whose natures are the exact opposite; they cleave with an intense nervous clinging to ignorance, as though "the worst" had a less real existence when

not fully known. Mary was of this latter type of character. What she could not alter she tried, with pathetic foolishness, not to see; as though she could cheat grief by turning away her head. Thus, when looks of indignant pity met her whenever she went outside her door, she doggedly set herself against understanding what they meant; when any neighbours, either by hint or comment, would have enlightened her as to the general opinion concerning her husband's conduct, she invariably silenced them in such a way that all approach to the subject was soon checked amongst them; wilfully blind, she would not let herself suspect how constantly her husband and Jessie were together, how surely the net that the syren had thrown over him was being drawn closer and closer every day.

Yet she was only able to deceive herself by halves. There are writers who would lead us to think that our inner selves are duplicate, and that there is an unconscious action in the secret depths of the soul of which our conscious selves take no cognizance. Something of the sort was at work in poor Mary through all her desperate struggles not to lose all confidence in that husband whom she did but love the dearer for all his faults. The "hidden soul," as Dallas calls it, took no heed of the cloud in which the wife, resolute not to distrust her Jem, took such pains to wrap herself; but, with remorseless fidelity, observed and registered each small suspicious circumstance, too small for the reasonable conscious self to take note of—and yet each was another pebble thrown on the

heap of doubt which, shapeless and indistinct, weighed on Mary's heart, and made it ache ever more and more painfully.

She could not wish herself dead, for she was the mother of children; but she did feel daily more and more, that life was a weary, nay almost an intolerable, burden. But for those children, and for the one unborn who was to wake into life late in the autumn, she would indeed have wished and longed for death!

For the only time during their married life her husband was, more than once, during that bitter summer, guilty of open complaints that Providence was about to burden him with another child. Did he not work like a slave already? he asked—and never any comfort for all his toil! Mary tried to smile, and reminded him gently that Bill, their eldest boy, was already working in the brickfields, whenever, she added with a sigh, there *was* any work to be had, that terrible bad season, and so "makin' way for his little brother or sister, whichever it do please the Lord to send." But Jem made no response beyond an impatient twist of his person, and a muttered ejaculation. And his unretracted murmurs went all the sharper to the mother's heart, because they struck her as if pointed into the shape of a reproach to her.

Nevertheless, in spite of the pain this gave her, Mary did not cease to look forward with faint tremulous eagerness to the birth of her child in the autumn,—partly, no doubt, because the motherly instinct that was strong in her moved her to double

tenderness towards the little unwelcomed stranger, whose own father grudged it its life: but there was yet another, and almost a stronger, reason, in a hope over which she brooded night and day. It was this. The time of the birth of her children had ever, from the very first, been a season of renewed tenderness and affection from her husband. In cottage homes so much depends at such times on the husband. It is true that kindly neighbours are seldom wanting to give all needful help in which a woman's hand is requisite; but, however kind these may be, it is still the husband's care and attention which is the wife's chief comfort and resource. And Jem had always done his part, not only without grudging, but most lovingly. Never was such a nurse, Mary thought; so strong, and so thoughtful, and never seeming to think all the "woman's work" that fell to his lot a trouble, but rather a labour of love. Such cares could never fail to draw the two closer; and indeed Mary looked back upon the birth of each of her children as upon successively-renewed honeymoons, when for a time Jem ceased to be the exacting husband, and the lover of her youth was restored to her.

No wonder she looked forward to the hour of pain and weakness, that the chilly autumn days would bring her, with longing, passionate hope. What if those chilly days were to give her back her home sunshine? What if they should once more open the road to her husband's heart? He *would* love his baby, she knew, when it was born, whatever he might say beforehand; and would not the little, helpless

creature be a new tie to bind them together? Then, an opportunity might come when Jem was softened, and tender, and in the right mood to listen, and she would tell him she was not happy, and ask him to consent to changing their house; and if he did, and if they did really get away from the near neighbourhood of Mrs. Hicks, might not all once more be well with them? Thus Mary, over and over again, dreamed of the future, forecast what she would say, and imagined Jem's answer; and Fancy was a friend to her, and gave her many happy moments, even when sad Anxiety sat at her fireside day by day, like a household guest.

October closed that year with a bitter frost, and all nature was lying in that first icy grasp of Winter, when Mary Basley welcomed a little daughter into this world of care. It was "hard times" with the poor just then—times of severe poverty and privation; but how kind the neighbours were to her! Nothing seemed too much to do for her, and yet—and yet—her gratitude was disturbed by a feeling that would arise, that they went on as *if they wanted to make up to her for something!* Nor did she miss due care and attention from her husband; but, nevertheless, poor thing, in respect to him, her hopes were not realized. He took heed, certainly, that she should suffer no neglect, but that was not the sort of care which Mary had hoped would bring them nearer to each other in heart. To be sure, her eldest girl was now old enough to be useful in waiting on her, and Jem was naturally not called upon for as much personal attendance as

he used once to lavish on her, and yet—and yet—was that all? Or was it, as she now and then feared, that he was avoiding her as much as he possibly could? Was it a fancy of hers that he went about the house with the air of a sulky criminal, and shrank guiltily from meeting her eye?

Mary could not bear it. She made an opportunity, since none came; and one evening contrived that she and Jem should be alone together, except for the presence of the infant that slept on her arm, and, with great tact and tenderness, broached the subject nearest to her heart, telling him in words the most careful, the most loving, the most guarded from all betrayal of resentful feeling, how unhappy she was, and how much she wished to go and live somewhere else. "It 'ould be better for the both of us," she ended.

Jem did not burst into reproaches to her for being jealous this time. He sat on the bed beside her, with downcast looks fixed on the patchwork counterpane, till she had finished speaking. Then, raising his head, and meeting her appealing look with miserable eyes that betrayed a soul not less tortured—ah, perhaps far more so—than her own, he said in a low voice:

"Better for the both of us if we'd never set eyes on each other;" and flinging himself on the bed, as far away from her as possible, he hid his face in his arms and sobbed violently.

Mary was almost stunned by the sight of this sudden passion.

"Don't, Jem! Dearest Jem, don't!" were the first

words that broke from her, and, springing towards him, she threw her loving arms around him with tender and wife-like affection. But before she could say the words of comfort and encouragement that were rushing warm from her heart to her lips, Jem had shaken himself free from her as if the very touch of her fingers burnt him, and abruptly thrown himself out of the room.

The next time she saw him he was gloomy and taciturn, and gave her no opening whatever for the least word that might lead to the confidence she hoped for.

PART V.

DESERTED!

"She felt as though upon her bowed-down head
Had fallen a misery not known before,
And all seemed light that erst her crushed heart bore.
For she was wrapped in uttermost despair,
And motionless within that chamber fair
She stood, as one struck dead and past all thought."

MORRIS.

At last, when Mary Basley's babe was very little more than three weeks old, the final blow came.

She was sitting, feeling rather feeble still, on a low stool near the fire, with her infant in her arms, whilst her eldest girl—who, young as she was, seemed already neater-handed than her poor, clumsy, painstaking mother—was engaged in making ready for the return from work of her father and brother.

The frost had given out. There was once more a little doing in the brickyard, and Jem and his son had both had the luck to be amongst the few who obtained employment. Jem's father and grandfather having worked in Graham's brickyard before him, his family enjoyed a sort of special right to employment whenever there was any to be given to anybody, and were seldom out of work, except when a long frost put an entire stop to brickyard labours.

Little Bill Basley was the first to come in, looking, as his mother detected in a moment, disturbed and uneasy.

"Why, Bill, my boy, you do look dull," said she; "you haven't got into any trouble, have 'ee?"

"No, mother," said the boy, sitting down on the floor beside her, and moving the folds of the shawl in which the baby was wrapped to get a glimpse at the placid little face.

"You may kiss her," said his mother, "only be gentle now. Don't wake her! Where's Father, my lad?"

"That's it," said the boy, looking up; "do 'ee know, Mother, Father ain't been to the yard, not all day to-day, he hain't!"

Mary turned white.

"An' they be talkin' about Father in *such* a way Mother!"

Mary turned whiter still, but did not speak. The boy clung to her, and buried his face in the folds of her gown.

"Wherever is he to, Mother, do 'ee think?" he

whispered, while his two sisters came and stood near, with round frightened eyes, waiting for their mother's answer.

"How should I know?" said she, half angrily.

All sorts of vague conjectures arose in her mind at once; but, strange to say, not for one moment did she hit upon the truth, of which, however, she was not long to remain in ignorance.

There were voices and steps outside, eager hands upon the latch of the door, eager feet crossing the threshold. In burst a throng of neighbours, indignant, compassionate, sympathising, in haste to tell their tale.

Mary felt that ill-news was at hand, and rose to meet it, pale as a statue, her baby in her arms, her children clinging, awe-stricken, to her dress.

"Is he dead? oh, is he dead?" she asked in a low, steady voice, for at the sight of her and her children all eagerness was checked, and the intruders stood and looked at one another, each waiting for some one else to begin. Mary's question broke the spell. The oldest woman present came up to her and put her arm round her.

"My dear, no! No, bless your soul, not dead. But sit down, sit down. Oh, to think of it—" she cried, indignation mastering her, and turning half away from Mary to the others—"she not been outside the door yet—her young baby—oh, the heartlessness! No, my poor dear, he ain't dead, the bad, wicked fellow; he's left you, my poor lamb; he's gone off wi' that bad creatur', Jessie Hicks—and I hope the Lord

won't never forgive him," she added, in a tone of vehement bitterness, as she felt, by the lax helplessness of the figure she supported, that the wretched wife had fainted in her arms. Ah, what a merciful provision it is that people do faint at the sudden shock of an overwhelming grief, so that suffering is, for the first sharp moment, lost in unconsciousness!

Then ensued a sudden rush and bustle of assistance and sympathy.

One seized the infant from its mother's nerveless arms; another hustled the other children about and told them to be quiet; a third rushed out of the cottage to communicate to outsiders how poor Mary had "dropped down just like the dead" at the news of her desertion; the rest gathered round her, trying to "bring her to," and exchanging loud, eager whispers, in which they heaped condemnation on Jem Basley and his wretched partner in guilt, intermingled with deep pity and sympathy for Mary and her children, and many practical conjectures as to how the deserted family was to live and not starve.

This was the scene to which poor Mary awoke, with feeble sighs, and slow recollection of the blow that had struck her down.

"Where's Jem?" she asked faintly. And then there was a fresh buzz of mingled condolence and abuse.

Mary remained quite still, whilst returning strength and memory brought home to her the cruel meaning of what they said.

Then she rose up with a strange air of dignity, that

pathetic dignity that the endurance of deep sorrow often gives.

"Get out of my house, all of you," said she; "I do want my house to myself."

Her tone, though she spoke low and as if utterance were a painful effort, was resolute, almost wrathful—a tone that compelled obedience. Besides, few ever contradict the voice of a great grief. People know that they cannot comprehend it; that, however full of pity they may be, they are, after all, but spectators. All they can do, if they would comfort, is to give Nature what she asks for, and, as often as not, Nature simply asks to be let alone. Mary's neighbours left her with kind words, each begging to be sent for at any moment if she could be the "leastest use;" but they did leave her, and when they were gone she locked and bolted the door without a word, and returning to her low seat near the fire crouched down upon it, her arms resting on her knees and her face bowed down on her arms, motionless and silent.

One of the neighbours had laid the baby in the cradle, happily asleep, for Mary had fed it, and was in the very act of hushing it to rest when the news of her desolation had come to her. Round the cradle, clinging close to one another for comfort, watching their mother with scared, terrified eyes, stifling their sobs, and wiping furtively away the frightened tears that stole down their cheeks, dimly miserable, only half realizing what had happened, were the other children. Even little Bobby, who was only two years old, had caught the general impression of calamity, and lay as

still as a frightened mouse in Bill's arms, as if nestling there for refuge from some impending terror. Now and then they heard a neighbour's footstep come stealing to their door; there would be a pause of a minute or two to listen, perhaps with the expectation of hearing hysteric sobs or screams, and after that the sound of the footsteps retreating again. Now and then the little boys, Lot and Alby, moved or spoke, and were hushed to silence again by the elder ones, as though the very sound of their voices were a thing forbidden. The fire, by the light of whose cheerful blaze Amelia had been preparing supper for the father who would never return to eat it, died gradually down into a dull red glow; the room grew darker and darker; the figure of their mother was only visible as an indistinct, black heap; but still the children hardly dared to stir, much less to strike a light.

At last Bill discovered that little Bobby was actually asleep, and Lot began to cry too distinctly to be quieted, and to announce that he did not like the dark.

"'Melia," whispered the elder brother, "hadn' we best put the childr'n to bed?"

"Yes," she answered, in the same low voice; "will you carr' Bobby up, an' Liz an' I'll bring the other two?"

And so, with doubtful, trembling steps, and many backward glances at their mother, still in her old position, they crept upstairs. But there Bill left the others and returned down again alone. Very

timidly he went up to his mother and touched her shoulder.

"Mother," he said.

She took no notice.

"Mother, may I light a candle?"

Still no notice.

"Mother, isn't it time for us all to go to bed?"

For one moment she raised her head. "Yes; go to bed, all of you. Tell 'Melia to put the little uns to bed."

"Baby and all?" asked the boy wistfully, and feeling very near tears. He wanted to rouse his mother and coax her to come upstairs with them, and he felt he was not succeeding at all.

"Ay, take Baby upstairs," she answered, in the same half-stupid, indifferent voice, sinking back into the old attitude.

Bill hunted for the matches and lighted a candle.

"Ain't *you* coming, Mother?" he asked, lingering.

Then she lifted her head once more.

"Take away the light," she cried out, as if it hurt her. "Go to bed, Bill; you and all of 'em!"

Whatever might be Mary Basley's faults as a housekeeper, as a mother she had certainly succeeded in making her children obey her. Without another word Bill carried away the light, and whispered to his eldest sister to go down very quietly and fetch Baby.

"You must take Baby into bed with you to-night, I suppose," said he. "Mother says we be all to go to bed. I wonder how long it'll be afore *she'll* come up too!"

It was some comfort to the forlorn children to have at least got their orders. The little ones were soon in bed, and their elders followed them with the more alacrity, because they were young enough to be unconsciously under the influence of the true child-notion that sorrow cannot be going to last beyond one day, and that when they wake up in the morning they will find it gone. It was not really very late, but Bill and his sisters fancied that an enormous time must have elapsed whilst they sat in the darkening room. It was, doubtless, quite the middle of the night, they thought. Both the girls cried as they undressed themselves, but they were soon as sound asleep as the little ones. Bill, however, lay wakeful and expectant, hoping and listening for his mother's step, and miserable because she did not come. He felt quite glad when the baby awoke and began to cry. That sound would surely summon his mother in a moment. But no: the wailing grew louder, and he heard Amelia talking to the baby, and hushing it with promises that Mother was coming in a minute; but "Mother" did not come.

"Bill! Whatever shall us do?" cried his sister's voice, half-sleepy, half-sobbing, from the inner room. "Do come in here, Bill! Baby do want Mother so bad."

By this time Baby, in great indignation at such unusual neglect, was screaming loud enough to be heard from one end of the court to the other.

"Oh, why don't Mother come!" sobbed Bill; but still she came not.

Then the boy took a sudden resolve.

"Wrap up Baby," said he to his sister, "an' give her to me! I'll take her to Mother."

His heart beat as he spoke, for the children had conceived a sort of eery, superstitious awe of their mother, sitting so still and strange, and deaf even to her infant's cry.

"Come too!" he said to Amelia, feeling as if to go alone were almost beyond his courage.

But she trembled and shuddered, and drew the sheet over her head, and said she "couldn't—she was afraid." So Bill took the child in his arms, and went downstairs.

There sat his mother, very nearly in the same position as he had left her, but more plainly seen now, for the moon had risen, and the night was not at all a dark one. The boy paused at the stair-foot, and waited a moment, hoping that the sound of his step might attract her attention; then, finding it did not, he ventured closer, timidly called "Mother," and at last, in a sort of despair, burst into tears, and sobbed,—

"Oh, Mother, Baby *do* want you so!"

"Can a woman forget her sucking child?"

Mary, half stupid from the shock she had received, had actually done so for a season. Torpid with grief, the voice of her own child had been to her as a confused sound without meaning.

But now it reached her. She started, she looked up, she saw her son standing beside her in his little white shirt, all forgetful of the cold, though it made him shiver and tremble, with the wailing infant in his arms; and all the mother in her revived.

"My dear, you'll catch your death," she cried, taking the child from him. "Quick and get into bed again, and wrap yourself up in the blanket," and even whilst she spoke she was pressing the infant to her bosom, and then broke into fond, caressing words. "My sweet, my precious! Did Mother forget her? Was she a very hungry darling? But go to bed, my dear love, do. I be frightened to see how cold you be!"

Half an hour later Bill had succeeded in coaxing his mother to come upstairs herself, to undress, and to lie down with Baby, once more soothed to slumber, in her arms.

He had partly dressed himself, and was further muffled in his mother's shawl, which she had insisted on wrapping round him, and he looked the oddest little figure imaginable. You would hardly have known whether to laugh or to cry if you had seen him, in that quaint guise, striving, with pathetic, wistful looks, to minister to a grief beyond his childish comprehension—for, after all, he was only eleven years old.

"What else can I do for 'ee, Mother?" he asks tenderly, bending over and kissing her.

Bill's eyelids are quite red and swollen with the tears he has shed that night, and the least touch would set him off crying again. But on his mother's face, though there is grief enough indeed, there is no trace of tears, only a rigid, heavy expression, like that of one half-paralysed. She looks hopelessly at her son. Oh for some relief to the unbearable weight she feels within! But who can give that

"Bill," she says faintly; "Bill, my dear lad, kiss me an' go to your bed. I'd rather know you was asleep than anything. You'll be *that* tired in the morning. But, afore you go, just kneel down an' let me hear thee say thy prayers. *I* can't pray. My heart do feel so stony like. I tried just now, but I couldn' get out a word. But I'd like to hear *thee*, my lad. I seem it 'ould do me good."

Bill knelt down. Already two or three times that night had he repeated those same simple prayers, the only ones he knew—just the verse about children coming to Christ which he had learned at the Sunday-school, and the Lord's Prayer, and a tiny, old-fashioned hymn that his mother had taught him as soon as he could speak. They had no particular reference to the special distress of the moment, but in that night of sorrow and perplexity saying them over had been his chief resource whenever he felt more than usually unhappy. Once indeed he had begun to add an appendix of his own, in the form of a sort of interrogatory appeal, "O Lord, whatever be us to do 'bout Mother?" But he had checked himself, rather shocked at his own presumption, and thinking that perhaps it was not right to add common words to his prayers like that.

Now, at his mother's request, he again repeated the simple form of words he had used from infancy, and the hard look on her pale, haggard face softened as she listened. When he had ended, she gathered herself up in the bed, and cried with an "exceeding bitter cry,"—

"O Lord, merciful Father in heaven, pity me!"

She had not an idea that she was praying. It was an ejaculation that broke from the depths of her extreme misery, as naturally as a cry from bodily pain. But the instant after she hid her face in the pillow, and burst into such a passion of sobs and tears as frightened her little son terribly. Never had he seen anyone cry like that, and he would have given anything to stop it. He little knew that it was a blessed relief, like the breaking up of ice round the heart. And when the sobs gradually died away, and the tears ceased to course down her cheeks, he little knew but that for those sobs and tears the angel of sleep would have been unable to approach to close his mother's weary eyes, and rock her into the blessed peace of that refreshing unconsciousness in which grief is silenced, and pain, for a season, stilled.

PART VI.

THE WOLF AT THE DOOR.

"Beyond participation lie
My troubles, and beyond relief;
If any chance to heave a sigh,
They pity me and not my grief."

WORDSWORTH.

If to a woman living at ease, sure of the means of support, and to whom poverty, if it approaches her at all, simply means curtailment of the luxuries and

comforts, not of the *necessaries* of life, such bitter trouble came as that which had stricken Mary Basley, it is probable that, for a time, the all-absorbing, crushing question that would occupy her days would be, "How shall I bear this unbearable grief?"

I know not whether Mary were the more or the less to be pitied because she had no time to be crushed, and ask herself this question. There was another as absorbing, and more peremptory, which pushed itself into the front place, between her and all else, even her sorrow; and this was, "How am I to get bread for all these children and myself?"

She gratefully accepted the offer of her next-door neighbour, Ann Bradshaw, the same elderly woman who had told her the evil tidings that had put the finishing stroke to the ruin of her happiness, to go to the relieving officer for her; for not only did she feel too weak to walk to his house, which happened to be at the other end of the town, but also one of the few religious customs which she had been brought up to observe rigidly, was that of not setting foot out of doors after her child's birth until the day on which she "went to church," to offer her own thanksgiving, and to carry her infant to be baptized; and she had already asked Ann Bradshaw to be her companion on the following Friday morning, when there would be a week-day service at the parish church. She intended to meet the difficulty of finding sponsors—that apparently small obstacle which, in her class of life, keeps back many a little one from the font—by standing herself, with Ann, as godmothers, and

getting the parish clerk to represent, as he very commonly did, the absent godfather.

It is rather strange that, in the midst of all her heavier trouble, the having to apply for parish aid was felt by her as a distinct additional burden of grief and disgrace, for her childhood had been spent in the midst of habitual pauperism, and there was hardly any depth of beggary and dependence with which the Silifants were unfamiliar. Mary herself had often, as a child, been sent out to beg from house to house, wherever any family had a charitable name, and had felt no shame at the time; and it was a household maxim amongst the Silifants to get parish pay whenever they could, and as much as they could. But with the Basleys it was very different; and Mary had become a Basley by marriage, and took as much pride in Basley respectability as any one of them all. Few suspect under what humble roofs, and how low down on the social ladder, that human weakness known as "family pride" is to be found; and it is nowhere more tenacious than in the breast of those whose connection with the family of their pride is by marriage and not by birth. Now, the Basleys considered it as a special distinction that none of their kin, as far back as the memory of the present generation could reach, had ever been reduced to seek help from the parish. Like others, they had fallen from time to time into great straits of poverty, but they had ever contrived to hold themselves above that terrible degradation, as they considered it. Even old-age pay, which stands on rather a different footing, in the

general estimation, from any other kind of parish help, had never been received by the aged Basleys; for Arleigh chanced to be rich in charitable bequests in aid of the "second poor," *i.e.* poor people who do not receive parish relief; and one of these, which bore the name of Wilson's Charity, brought in a not inconsiderable annual sum to be expended in small weekly allowances, whose amount was to be decided by the trustees, to old people above sixty years of age.

It is often said, and doubtless with some truth, that the charitable bequests "to the poor" which are to be found in so many parishes, sometimes do more harm than good, and have a demoralizing effect. Such was not the case with Wilson's Charity. It cannot be told how much real good it did, how many poor old hearts it comforted. Ah, the aged poor, how they sometimes suffer! If they are childless and solitary, or if their sons and daughters are too poor (or, alas! too ungrateful) to help them much, how small is the weekly pittance allowed to clothe, and warm, and feed them! What grief to end a life of brave independence in a workhouse ward, defeated at last, and reduced to the same level as those who did not toil and struggle as they did to preserve self-respect! Wilson's Charity gave just aid enough to avert this fate, and to enable those who received it to die in peace and quiet amongst their nearest kindred; and very grateful the old people were who were lucky enough to get it, to Providence and the trustees. I am afraid the century or so that had elapsed since

Wilson made his will had blotted him out altogether, as an individual, from the thoughts of those who enjoyed his bounty; Wilson's Charity was a thing, not a person. But the trustees were plainly people, and not things; and seldom, indeed, did one of these gentlemen pass the door of any to whom his influence had secured the bounty of the dead, without a fervent "God bless him! he got me Wilson's Charity," winging its way to heaven as he went by.

Jem's grandfather, the father of Thomas and Zachariah Basley, had been nominated to the enjoyment of Wilson's Charity when he was seventy years old, by Mr. Graham, who was one of the five trustees. He had been thus enabled to live amongst his children in great honour and respect until his death at the age of eighty-three, and had seen with much satisfaction a good score of descendants, all being brought up to walk in the same path of respectability and independence that he and his old woman (gone to her rest at least thirty years earlier) had in their day steadily trodden both in good and evil times.

It was hardly to be expected that amongst so many there would not be some who would fall below the family standard of what a Basley ought to be and to do. Some married foolishly; some marred their fortunes by habits of intemperance; others were unlucky enough to have confirmed bad health, or to want sense or energy. Still it did so happen that nobody had ever had to apply for parish pay, and it was bitter to Mary that she must be the first. But there was no help for it; only the day before he left

her Jem had asked what money she had in the house, and had taken all but the two shillings she was reserving to pay the rent. Except for that she was destitute, and worse than destitute, for there was a bill owing at the shop for bread, and she had not yet paid the woman who had been with her when her child was born.

In the afternoon the relieving officer called to inquire into the circumstances of her case. The out-of-door relief given in Arleigh amounted to something enormous, and the high rates weighed heavily on the pockets of the poorer ratepayers. The relieving officer had, therefore, been directed to be extremely strict in making inquiries, and to keep down payments as much as possible. He was a Poor-rate payer himself, and, looking at the matter from the Poor-rate payers' point of view, was filled with indignation against a man who had left a wife and seven children to burden the parish. He felt it was his duty to the board of guardians to vituperate somebody, and the right person being out of his reach, there was nothing for it but to vituperate the wrong one. He accordingly poured forth his wrath upon Mary; represented to her what a bad, worthless fellow her husband must be; told her she did not deserve any relief at all, and that he expected that the board would make her go into the house; and finally, that the police were after her husband, and that he would be had up before the magistrates and sent to prison.

He did not leave her any relief—perhaps it was not in his power to do so—but he directed her to make her

application on the following board-day; and turned a deaf ear to her assurances that she could not, and would not, break up her home and go into the workhouse.

It was nearly a week before board-day came, and Mary by that time was able to attend in person, and to hear from the guardians what she had already had to hear from their officer; how very badly her husband had behaved to her and, what in their eyes seemed a worse offence, to the parish. Mary listened meekly, now and then wiping away a tear. They did not know what pain it gave her to hear Jem condemned, badly as he had behaved to her. They wound up by telling her that she and her children must come into the house; hers was not a case to which outdoor relief could be given.

In vain she broke into sobs, and protested against a decree which seemed to her so cruel. What! come into the house? Be parted from her children? See her girls herded with tramps' children and such-like in the workhouse school? Never, never! Did the gentlemen know what they were asking?

The "gentlemen" knew that the order to come into the house, where the little family must necessarily be separated and classed according to sex and age, did indeed almost amount to a penal sentence; but they thought it proper to mark their sense of Jem's misconduct by a somewhat severe administration of the needful charity to the helpless beings he had deserted. And after all, not liking to come into the workhouse was a mere matter of feeling; the woman, and her

children too, would be well taken care of and kindly treated within its walls. So they hardened their hearts against Mary's expostulations, and let her go away unrelieved, feeling convinced that grim want would soon drive her to accept their help in the one way in which they offered it.

Yet they were not hard-hearted men in their unofficial capacity; for the chairman himself, meeting her later in the day and recognizing her, was ten times more struck with her wan and woe-begone aspect than he had been when sitting in his chair of office. He promptly put his hand in his pocket and gave her a shilling, resolved that she and her little ones should not starve that day at any rate; but he accompanied it with an admonition to be a sensible woman and go into the house. What was the use of holding out against it?

Happily for Mary, there was other help in the world besides such as this. The first that she met with came from her own class. The very day after her husband left her, a few shillings were subscribed by some of his fellow-workmen and brought to her by a neighbour, who would hardly stay to be thanked. But for those few shillings how would Mary have lived until other aid more tardily reached her? They came at the moment of her greatest need.

Then she received a visit from her mother-in-law. Very rare and somewhat formidable occurrences her visits were, and never had she seemed sterner and more awful than she did then. She had arrayed herself majestically in her garments of state, as it was

her custom to do on what she considered formal and important occasions; and undoubtedly her dignity was enhanced by her black silk gown, silk shawl (colour, red shot with blue), and black satin bonnet all looking as if made and designed expressly for her, and having in truth been in her possession so many years, that they seemed to those who knew her like a part of herself. Grief made her dark countenance look fierce and grim; and although she had set out, from a sense of duty, on a solemn mission of comfort to her daughter-in-law, repressed sorrow, which she was too proud to show, made her voice and manner even more harsh and rigid than usual. Yet she had come to offer help as well as comfort.

"Your father-in-law an' me have been a-considerin what it do lay in our power to do for you, Mary," said she, "an' we've concluded to take 'Lizabeth Ann. She 'ont eat much, an' I can make her useful about the house—an' learn her my trade, may be, as she do get older." It was a generous offer, but it was not made generously. Indeed it was hardly made in the form of an offer at all. Old Mrs. Basley did not even go through the form of asking Mary if she were willing to part with one of her girls. She would, of course, be only too thankful to get the child off her hands. So the mother-in-law tranquilly selected the prettiest, and the one she liked best, of her son's children, and informed Mary of her intentions with regard to her.

Mary was too meek to resent this taking her consent for granted; yet she felt a pang as she murmured, "I'm sure you be extremely kind."

They will teach my child to despise me, she thought in her heart; but she knew she had no choice about letting her go, and ought to be grateful to get food and shelter for one of her seven, at any rate.

"Well, put her two or three things together, an' I'll take her back with me," said Mrs. Basley, in her tone of command, and Mary did not venture to disobey. She called to the child to come upstairs with her, that she might throw her arms round her in peace, and tell her, with passionate kisses, to be a good maid and not forget poor Mother. Elizabeth Ann did not cry; she was elated at the idea of going to stay with her grandmother, and hardly realized that she was giving up home.

"Don't cry, Mother. I shall come an' see you every day, an' tell 'ee how I be gettin' on," she said complacently. "Had I better put on my Sunday frock now, or put it up in the bundle?"

And Mary, with a sigh, answered the child's question, and began to collect her few clothes. When she came down she told her mother-in-law of the refusal of the board to grant outdoor relief, and of her own determination not to go into the workhouse.

"You won't be able to keep to it," said the elder woman bitterly. "Zachary 'll speak to the master and get he to say a good word for 'ee to the board, but it won't be no use, I know. Oh! 'tis a sore disgrace to the whole family this business is! Thank the Lord poor Thomas an' his wife be in their graves, not to have their hearts broken by that wicked hussey! An' as to Jem. . . . "

The mother checked herself. It was no comfort to her to denounce Jem. With maternal injustice she looked wildly about her to find a scapegoat for his sins.

"My poor ruined son," she resumed in a choked voice, "whatever madness possessed thee! Ah, Mary, Mary! if you had but been a better wife to un! If you had but made him a comfortable home, poor chap—he 'ouldn' ha' been 'ticed away from it by no such wickedness. I bain't wishful to reproach you for it now, but didn' I tell 'ee hundreds o' times you did ought to keep a cleaner house? Well, there! 'tis no use talkin' now. Let bygones be. Come, 'Lizabeth Ann! I shall send her to school, Mary, an' do for her as if she was my own. An' 'Melia can come an' see her sister sometimes"—this was to console Amelia, who was crying in the background. "Perhaps 'Melia do think I did ought to ha' taken she. But you do know 'Lizabeth Ann's her grandfather's favourite."

"I'd sooner bide wi' Mother," growled Amelia, but so low that her grandmother did not catch what she said.

She was furious that anybody should come to the house to "scold" her mother—as Grandmother always did whenever she did come—and she wondered that her sister should be so "cock-a-hoop" at the notion of leaving home, and going away from Mother and Baby and all. She wished that Mother would just give Granny as good as she brought; but, child as she was, she knew it was useless to hope for that. Mary Basley never could stand up for herself, and never did.

Perhaps if she had been less incapable of resentment she might have been less trampled upon.

She attempted no defence against her mother-in-law's reproaches. She sat silent, casting down her sad eyes, hardly glancing up even to murmur "Good-bye, Grandmother. Be a good girl, 'Lizabeth Ann," in reply to old Mrs. Basley's parting salutation.

Amelia drew near to her, and placed the baby on her knees, and kissed her, and sobbed out, "Don't care a brass farthing for what the old hag says;" but Mary only lifted her swimming eyes, and said, with a pitiful twitch of her trembling lip, "Don't talk like that of Grandmother, my dear; it ain't right."

"She *is* a hag," muttered Amelia, *sotto voce*, and looked a little sulky.

But her mother took no notice. She bent over the infant, and kissed it again and again.

"Poor little dear," she said, meditatively, "there's nought but sorrowful looks on thy mother's face, as did ought to always wear a smile when she kisses her darling. But Mother can't, my precious. Poor Mother can't! Poor Mother han't got no smiles left."

Amelia crept away. It made her *too* miserable to hear her mother talk like that. It gave her a vague unhappy sense of a misfortune beyond her comprehension, in which it was no use for her even to try and be a comfort, and she waited impatiently for her brother to come in; that brother who was so sturdy and reliable, although only two years older than herself. She and the others had a quaint habit of speaking of him as "Mother's Bill;" they could hardly

have told why, but anyone who knew half what the little lad was to his mother would have said the children's fancy had hit on a very appropriate name.

The boy came in, looking both sad and sorry, for he had to tell his mother that after that week there would be no more work for him at the brickyard, winter weather having decidedly set in. He noticed 'Lizabeth Ann's absence, and the new shade of unhappiness on his mother's face in a moment, and signed to Amelia to come and tell him what had happened. They thought their mother, busy with the little ones, did not notice their whispered talk; and, intent upon what they were saying, were unconscious that their voices soon became perfectly audible, until Bill felt her hand on his shoulder, and stopped short in the very midst of an energetic denunciation of his grandmother.

"Hush, Bill," said the quiet voice, which ruled her children steadily enough, though it had had so little influence with her husband. "Hark to me, my lad, 'tis true what Granny said; if I'd been a better wife to Father, and if I could but ha' kept his house the same as he'd been accustomed to . . . ." a sob interrupted the sentence. She made an effort at composure and went on. "But I was brought up in the brickfields. What should I know o' housework? O 'Melia, if ever I lets you go into them brickfields, my girl! I do really think I'd rather starve. But from five year old to fifteen 'twas always the brickfield or the street for your poor mother. I was every bit as rough as Polly Hancock, every bit."

Bill shook his head. Polly was the thirteen-year old daughter of a neighbour, strong and active, but loud and saucy of tongue, unkempt and ragged in person, as wild as an unbroken colt. He did not trace in her the faintest resemblance to his mother, and indeed Mary did herself less than justice; the audacity which was Polly's chief characteristic was altogether foreign to her character, but she had been equally ignorant and untrained, and this was what she chiefly thought of. "Ay, I was," she answered, sadly, to her son's mute remonstrance. But he would not hear of it. "It ain't true," he said stoutly; "you was ten times better to Father than he deserved. He was bad to you always; *always*—an' I wish he may catch it for his wickedness, I do. I do hate him with all my soul!"

Mary looked at her son with silent horror. He met her eyes without flinching, and stubbornly repeated, "So I do!" Then she pushed him away from her, and told him to "Go 'long," with an air of cold displeasure he had never seen in her before.

"Mother, Mother!" cried the boy, flinging his arms round her, "don't look at me like that. I'll kill myself, I will, if you do! How can I help it, Mother? How can I help hating Father when he's broke your heart, an' left us to starve or go to the workhouse—Baby an' all—an' been unkind to us this long time, and set folk talkin' so as I can't bear to go outside the door."

His mother did not return his embrace. She went back to her seat in silence, and seemed about to busy

herself with the baby. 'Melia, terrified and miserable, followed her, and implored her to speak to Bill.

"No, I won't," she answered passionately. "What, when all the folk in the place is cryin' out on his poor father, his own son let himself down to turn against un, same as the whole pack of 'em! His own son 'on't stand up for un!"

"How can I, Mother, when he done it?" Bill asked, in a trembling voice.

"Stand up for un, right or wrong," murmured Mary, still not directly addressing Bill; "that's a son's part. Let folk see he 'on't listen to a word against his father, no matter wh'er 'tis true or not. Shame 'em into the decency o' holdin' their tongues, an' not blackenin' a man's name afore his own child."

Bill leaned against the fire-place, and began to cry bitterly. He was a boy of a simple, direct nature, who hated mysteries and perplexities, and liked to see the path of duty spread out before him as plain as a turnpike road. But now life seemed transformed into a confused inextricable tangle, wherein nothing would ever be straight again.

But his mother's wrath soon melted into tenderness.

"Come hither, my own lad," she said, when the younger children were put to bed and all was quiet. "Come hither, 'Melia, too, I've summat to say to 'ee, my childr'n. You did grieve I sadly, Bill, my boy, a talkin' 'bout hatin' of your father. It did strike I cold to the heart to hear 'ee. Your father have done a terrible wicked thing. . . . I couldn' never have thought he'd be so lost. . . . But there, he've done it,

an' if any person has a call to hate un 'tis I, an' if I don't, no person else has a right to. An' you be his own son, Bill, an' did ought to ask God to forgive un, and bring un to a better mind, an' not stand by an' harden your heart against un, when you do hear folk cryin' out on what he've done. Oh, Bill, when you was born how proud your father was wi' you; he wasn't at home from his work a minute afore you was in his arms. A little weakly cryin' chap too, you was, but he was dearly fond o' you. He never didn' think the day 'd come when his little lad 'ould turn against un."

"It ain't my fault," muttered Bill, through half-shut lips.

"An' Fanny," his mother continued; "what a work he did use to make wi' Fanny!" Fanny was her second child, the next in order of birth to Bill, and who had died at six years old, after a long, lingering illness. "If Fanny was alive," pursued Mary, "perhaps your father never wouldn'. . . ." Sobs interrupted her voice. With the waywardness of severe suffering she broke out into piteous lamentations for the lost darling of years ago. "Oh, I wish Fanny was alive!" she mourned. "Oh, what a good child you was to me, my Fanny! how terrible fond o' poor Father you was! Oh, if Fanny was alive I'd have some one to comfort me . . . ."

It was rather unjust to good Bill, her loving faithful little son; for, after all, when Fanny *was* alive she had been comparatively indifferent to the mother who slaved for her, morning, noon, and night, and had reserved all the vehemence of a spoilt child's capri-

cious affection for the father who used to pet her of an evening, and keep her up long after Mother had said she "did ought to be abed." But life, in this present incomplete stage, is full of this sort of injustice. Even Bill, child as he was, knew it was useless to reason with one distracted by trouble; and Mary herself, a moment later, hastened to make mute amends, for she kissed both her children fondly, Bill last, and then folded one arm round him, and leaned her head on his shoulder, and said wistfully:

"Mother don't hardly know what she be a-sayin' of. Mother's so full o' trouble!"

And then Bill's stubbornness altogether melted; or rather his whole nature was wrought up into one paroxysm of love to his mother, in which he could not but give her whatever she asked of him, though it might seem to be inseparably entwined with his very heartstrings. He threw his arms round her neck and said, in a low, steady voice:

"I be goin' to forgive Father, only I seem there be summat as won't hardly let me do it; but I be goin' to."

Later in the evening Bill told his mother that his work in the brickyard would cease with that week. She heard him in silent despair, and cast a piteous glance round the room, mentally appraising the furniture, and calculating how long she could hold out by carrying it bit by bit to the pawnshop, before starvation forced her into the workhouse.

But help was nearer at hand than she imagined. It so happened that Miss Rudd, the district visitor,

selected the very next day to visit Freeman's Court, and as she entered house after house, with her little bag of tracts, she heard at each a fresh version of the story of Mary's desertion, and present destitution. Miss Rudd was not a very popular person in the court. She was good, but vulgar; and not being rich enough to supplement her unacceptable criticisms with the acceptable help which might have made them endurable, was looked upon as a tiresome busybody, and even now and then excited such resentment by well-meant but irritating interference or remarks, as to be treated with abrupt rudeness, which, to do her justice, she always promptly forgave, but without having the least idea that she had brought it on herself.

But everybody was glad to see Miss Rudd appear on the day of which I have spoken, and there was quite an excitement to know which house she would enter first, for every housewife was eager to be the one to pour forth the stream of gossip in its newest freshness. Miss Rudd was quite pleased at the air of welcome with which she was received, for her feelings were often hurt by perceiving that with all her busy devotion to good works, the victims of her benevolence did not like her. She set it down to the depravity of human nature, but it cost her many a pang, bitter though but half-acknowledged. She was so sorry for Mary that she gave her some money, which she was herself poor enough not to be able to spare without some self-denial, but weighted the gift with a well-intended lecture, which robbed Mary's gratitude of

half its warmth. And she gave yet more substantial help by bringing the case before the committee of the District Visiting Society which met that week. There was a great deal to do at the meeting, for it was just at the entrance of winter, and there was the lending of blankets and the distribution of coal tickets to be organized; but when, in compliance with the rule that district visitors were to mention any special case of distress occurring in their districts at the committee meeting, Miss Rudd brought forward Mary's name, there was no lack of attention to her sad tale.

There is, however, something rather hardening to the human heart in the machinery of societies; people are, and are obliged to be, so anxious not to be taken in. Consequently, there was no enthusiastic rush of public benevolence towards the deserted wife and her little ones. First there were many vague expressions of pity. Then a pause. Then somebody said:

"But something ought to be done for her!" A sentiment which met with general approval, but each seemed to wait for some other to make any practical suggestion.

"I suppose she should have a blanket," said the secretary of the blanket fund, at last.

"Ye-es," said the presiding lady doubtfully. "I think we might venture to do that. But as to any other special assistance, what do you think? One can't exactly encourage people to run away from their wives."

"But one can't let people starve, either," remonstrated one of the youngest ladies present.

"My dear, that is not the question," she was answered. "Of course the parish will take care of *that*."

"She *says* the parish won't give her anything unless she comes into the house," put in Miss Rudd.

"Yes, I dare say. But my husband says we must never believe those statements without inquiry. The poor always think themselves hardly used by the parish. And you see there are such numbers of families in want just now through sickness, or the man being out of work, or some other legitimate cause. One does not want to be hard-hearted, but one is obliged to give a preference—as far as the district money is concerned, you know—to people whose sufferings are not the result of their own wrong doing."

"But this poor woman is not suffering for her own wrong doing."

"No; but her husband's. I think, perhaps, it might be thought unfair if we helped her too much; that is, out of public funds. I am quite of opinion that it is a case for private benevolence."

This, then, was the decision to which they came, and it certainly did seem rather hard. The district committee would give Mary nothing but pity and the loan of a blanket; and as that useful covering is not eatable, and the primal necessity of Mary and her children was food, it looked rather like giving stones for bread. But it was not a bit like that in reality. There were seven ladies present at the committee meeting, and every one acquiesced in the decision; but every one of them, at the very same time, passed another resolution in her own heart that she would go and see

Mary without loss of time, and give her help. Before the evening of the following day Mary had received seven visits, and each visitor did something to better her condition. Two told her to come once a week to their houses for a jug of soup, a third offered to pay Bill's schooling through the winter, a fourth undertook the schooling of the younger boys. Not one of all the seven left the house without some present gift, or some promise of future, and in most instances of continued, assistance. The last visitor was Miss Rudd, who came to announce the loan of the blanket, and she was quite overpowered by Mary's tearful gratitude to her for having "named her" to the other ladies. She was so pleased that she actually became complimentary—a rare thing with her—for praise was a luxury Miss Rudd usually withheld from her fellow-creatures upon principle, because she thought it was so bad for them; but now she was fairly carried off her feet by a tide of kindly feeling, and energetically declared to Mary that she was a thoroughly deserving woman, and she had had great pleasure in recommending her.

Nor did the matter rest here. Several of the ladies, with Mrs. Graham at their head, stirred up their husbands to inquire into Mary's case and make representations in her favour to the board of guardians; and the result was that a week later Mary was informed that if she now applied for outdoor pay it would be allowed her, at all events throughout the winter.

PART VII.

HOW A WRONGED WOMAN CAN FORGIVE.

"Ah, dear, but come thou back to me,
Whatever change the years have wrought."

TENNYSON.

Time went by, and things prospered with Mary wonderfully. You remember that she happened to be married on the same day as young Mrs. Champion, the daughter of her husband's employer, Mr. Graham. This circumstance was known to Mrs. Browne, who, although not present at the district visitors' meeting of which I have spoken, soon heard of Mary's case, and, going to visit her, recognized, to her surprise, in the sorrow-stricken woman, the Mary Silifant of years before, her pupil from the brickyards, whom she had been so sorry to lose sight of, because, rough as she was, there was that about her which led her teacher to think that true gentle womanliness lay hidden, but not destroyed, under the outer shell of untrained ignorance and wildness with which circumstances had encrusted her real nature. Mrs. Browne had very little money at her disposal, but she was a born daughter of consolation. Her sympathy was so intuitive, and so almost unerring, that grief, without knowing why, was at ease with her, and many a burdened heart found relief in pouring out its sad secrets to her patient ear. Mary found more

comfort in the visit of her old teacher than in any other earthly thing, and the tie of friendship between them thus formed, or rather renewed, caused Mrs. Browne to feel great interest in her, so that she spoke warmly of her to others, and in especial to Mrs. Champion, who, like many another of Mrs. Browne's superiors in wealth and station, valued her greatly, and often asked her advice in dispensing the means that were at her disposal for helping the poor.

"You ought to know her, ma'am," said Mrs. Browne, smiling; "for, do you know, she was married the same day as you, and her eldest boy is the same age as Master Philip."

Up started the young lady. *She* was still young, though her contemporary Mary Basley looked already decidedly middle-aged. She was rich and good-natured, and was considered to be very kind to the poor; yet her charities were to her generally rather duties that must be done than labours of love. The details of such work appeared to her to be, one and all, so unavoidably dull! But a loving interest roused her heart at once, and her quick imagination drew an instant contrast between her own favoured lot and poor Mary's desolation. She felt, with a sudden curious thrill, as if it were a new truth that her nature had unexpectedly discovered, that the "poor person" whose wedding-day was the same as her own, was her blood relation, a sister of the same great family, having the same hope, and fear, and love; the same capacity for suffering pain, or for receiving pleasure, as herself.

"Poor thing, poor thing! what can I do for her?" she asked, with more emotion in her voice than her friends would have believed anything outside the circle of her own especial interest could have excited; and from that day forwards Mary Basley had no steadier, no more untiring helper than young Mrs. Champion. Invaluable was the assistance she afforded in putting the children, one after another, out into the world. Both the elder girls were trained to good service, one in her nursery and the other in her kitchen, and two of the boys also obtained their first start in life through her recommendation and assistance. And in giving her help she showed a sympathetic friendliness which was very grateful to the deserted woman's heart. It was foreign both to Mrs. Champion's nature and education to take any *heartfelt* interest in things and people who were even a little out of her own line; and towards the various multitude whom she lumped together in her mind as "the poor," her feelings, if she had ever taken the trouble to analyse them, would have been discovered to be somewhat of this nature: that they must be helped, poor things, because they were always in some sort of trouble, and wanted something to be done for them; but that, after all, they were very tiresome and disappointing. "Unsatisfactory" was an adjective more or less appropriate to them all. Therefore, when, her heart being once touched, she began to look at *one* poor woman from another and a more human point of view, Mary's humble virtues, her patient submission, her unmistakeable delicacy of feeling, the grave but unre-

sentful gentleness with which, when the subject was forced upon her, she invariably spoke of her husband, struck her as something exceptionally, and almost supernaturally, meritorious in "a person of her class."

"Married the same day as I was!"

It was quite curious how those words haunted her; how they used to rise up in her mind whenever anything happened to remind her of her own home happiness and prosperity. She, too, had been a bad housekeeper in the early days of her married life, just as she had gathered poor Mary Basley had been; and how foolishly cross and annoyed she could remember being whenever her husband noticed any of her shortcomings. Nobody would have ever given *her* the character of being "wonderful patient," which was what Mrs. Browne told her the neighbours said of Mary. And then in fancy she imagined herself in Mary Basley's present position, deserted, wronged, with a little crowd of helpless beings clinging forlorn to her skirts. . . . How should she endure such a lot? Not as the other wife did, she knew. But her imagination refused to grasp the idea of such an impossible calamity. She could only look with wonder, and pity, and respect almost amounting to awe, at the rough, homely woman who was yet strong enough to repress all complaint and outcry even when most cruelly wounded, and to rise to something better and nobler than resentment even when most deeply wronged. "I don't think I should be capable of so much quiet heroism," said Mrs. Champion to herself. And for the first time in her life she perceived that the moral

does not always follow the social rank, and that true superiority is not determined by birth, or even by education.

Mary was warmly grateful for the untiring interest Mrs. Champion showed in her and her trouble. She responded to it by considering the lady as a friend to whom all her concerns could be told; and, being of a soft dependent nature, ever longing to find somebody on whose direction she might rely, she seldom made any decision that seemed at all important to her without first asking her counsel and advice. And indeed it was happy for her that she had found such a friend, for even with all the help that she received she found life—the mere physical necessity of obtaining the means of keeping up existence—a hard struggle to a lonely woman with seven young children. As soon as ever her baby was old enough to be left in Amelia's charge, she had lost no time in trying to find some employment at which she could earn a maintenance; but the difficulties that she met with were most discouraging, owing to her utter want of qualification for any female occupation that requires practice or instruction. Only the worst paid and roughest employments were open to her, and the demand for such utterly unskilled labour is never very great.

Still she did at last get employed, and earned a reputation for honesty and steadiness, which went far to make people overlook her deficiencies. First she was engaged to help twice a week in a large laundry; and then, on market-days, she obtained regular employment at a public-house where small farmers and

village tradespeople used to put up, and where in consequence an extra hand was required on those occasions. On the three remaining days of the week there were generally "odd jobs" to be had, which Mary could more and more certainly rely on obtaining as years went on and she continued to work for the same employers, and established a claim and a character in her own humble line.

People thought her a fortunate woman, and some even went so far as to whisper that it was a capital thing for her that that husband of hers ran away. He was said to have had such a temper she could hardly call her soul her own, and since he left her what good friends she had met with, and how she and her children had prospered! No one said this to Mary, however. Something in her face and manner checked it; and besides, there was a story that she had taken her trouble *terrible* hard, and could never *abear* to talk about it. And by degrees Jem dropped almost entirely out of general recollection. Even his own parents and near kindred ceased to think about him; his brothers' and sisters' children just knew that they had once had an Uncle Jem, who was a disgrace and better forgotten, that was all. His own boys and girls shrank sensitively from anything that recalled him; to the younger ones he was a dim something in the past, shrouded in grief and gloom. Only Amelia and Bill preserved any distinct memory of him; and when on rare occasions they spoke of him in a whisper to each other, it was almost always in reference to their mother, whose state of mind in regard to their

lost father was to them a half-guessed, but wholly uncomprehended, mystery.

"Do she still lef' the door unbolted night times?" asked Amelia, one Sunday when she was at home on a visit from her place of service.

Bill nodded. "Yes, and 'on't go to bed till I be gone up, for fear I might bolt un. I don't say nothin' to her, but I do know that's why. I be sorry now that I did speak to her about it one day, 'cause she hain't never trusted I since."

"Do 'ee think *he's* alive, Bill?"

"I don' know why he shouldn'. But 'tis five years agone since we heard o' that travellin' man as told Bob Ford he'd a seen un in Shropshire. An'. it mayn't ha' been he then."

"Do 'ee know Mother teached Rachel to say *God forgive father* when she do say her prayers every night—ay, from the first prayers she've ever said at all?"

"I do know it. 'Tis all very well for Rachel, as never knowed him, and don't understand how he've acted to Mother. I promised Mother I'd forgive un, 'Melia, but I seem I can do it best when I don't think about un."

Amelia looked at her brother in wonder. Her own feeling towards her father was merely a blank sense that he was lost, and a dim regret that she possessed so discreditable a parent; but into Bill's resentment she could not enter. It seemed so strange to her that any definite feeling at all should be left, after such a lapse of time.

"What 'ould 'ee do if Father should ever come back?" she asked, curiously.

"He never won't. He've no right to," pronounced Bill with decision; and there their talk ended.

Bill was a young man now, over twenty years of age, and keeping company with a young woman, whom he hoped ere long to make his wife, but as devoted to his mother as ever. Amelia and Elizabeth Ann were both in service; the little brothers had become big lads, of whom one was at sea, another in the service of a relation of Mrs. Champion's, and a third worked with Bill in the brickyard, the Basleys' hereditary field of labour. The baby, Rachel, had grown up into a delicate, slender girl, the only one of the family who did not possess strong health, and the especial darling and delight of all the others.

Mary had been the best and most unselfish of mothers to them all, and reaped her reward in the warm love and respect of every one of them, except, perhaps, 'Lizabeth Ann, whose disposition to regard her mother as rather a poor clumsy creature, was however somewhat checked by the estimation in which she discovered her to be held by her mistress, Mrs. Champion. Mary often said, with a sigh, that she had much to be thankful for; and Bill always felt a little bit jealous of that sigh, for he knew he was a good son to his mother, and he thought it hard that he could not make her quite happy. Why should her thoughts go back to the bygone troubles of the past, which surely ought not to vex her now? Little Rachel, with the germ of a woman's intuition latent

in her, understood her mother better, and once in her brother's hearing said "poor Mother," when she heard her sigh; and Bill was quite cross at it, and told her sharply he did not see why she should pity Mother.

There was certainly nothing woe-begone in Mary's aspect. Some people said she looked better at forty than she had done at thirty, although she still had the air of being decidedly older than her real age. Her placid face reflected the placidity of her life; and if, when she was silent and alone, it wore the unmistakeable subdued look of one who had gone through much sorrow, there was nothing querulous in her expression, and every little home interest never failed to kindle the response of a peculiarly sweet and winning smile. There was little out of the common in her cast of countenance. You can hardly enter many cottages without finding one of the same type. A low, broad forehead; eyes rather deepset, of a greyish blue; hair of a neutral brown, tinged with grey; mouth wide and irregular; the figure of the middle height, and remarkable for great breadth of shoulder and general sturdiness of build, with a short neck and rather a large head. Such women are generally capable of extraordinary steadiness to labour, and patience to endure. They make good wives and better mothers, and, if somewhat over-practical and deficient in the softer sentiment of life, they are not deficient in real tenderness, and there are none on whose natures family ties have a stronger hold.

Such was the woman who came creeping down her

cottage stair in the early morning twilight, some months after the conversation I have related between Bill and his sister Amelia. She had just aroused her boys, and told them they must make haste and get up, and she was on her way to light the fire and to make ready some breakfast for them. Bill was very proud of his mother's goodness in always getting up to see them off. He used to tell Lot that it wasn't every mother would do for them as theirs did. And this morning was cold and chilly, and Mary was anxious to make the fire burn up quickly that she might get some tea, and start her boys with "summat hot inside 'em."

Little did she expect the sight that met her eyes. As she opened the door at the stairfoot she saw, with a species of terrified uncertainty, a bent and shrunken figure, sitting doubled up, as if shivering or in pain, on a chair opposite the fireplace.

In her amazement she "wist not that it was true, but thought she saw a vision," and a strange medley of feeling arrested her at the door-sill, and kept her standing motionless, unable to speak or to stir.

Then the figure by the fireplace raised its head and looked towards her, showing an unkempt, unshaven face, with hollow, sunken eyes, and pale cheeks. No word was spoken, but a pair of hungry miserable eyes sought Mary's, with a look of mute appeal, deprecating, pleading, entreating, shrinking, all at one and the same time.

Mary drew a quick sobbing breath. For one moment, too short almost to reckon, she pressed her

hand to her heart and hesitated, the next she darted forwards, threw her broad arm round the trembling wretch before her, and let his head fall on her shoulder. Still neither spoke, but the man seized her hand in a clinging convulsive clasp, and she felt he was shaking from head to foot. He did not meet her eyes now. His were averted as if in utter shame.

He was so altered by want and sickness that it was rather by instinct than by sight that Mary recognized him. His garments were ragged and filthy; his feet, bruised and sore, showed plainly through the miserable shoes that did not cover them. No beggar, tramping on the public road, ever looked more hopelessly forlorn. There was a step on the stair—the boys coming down to their breakfast. Jem Basley gave a terrified start, and his gaunt fingers closed tighter on his wife's hand. He half looked up and spoke for the first time, in a hurried whisper.

"I be come back, Mary. I be dyin'. I shouldn' trouble you long?"

The tone of voice was interrogative, though no question was asked. His wife did not answer in words. It seemed as if the power of speech had deserted her; but she did not draw away her hand from the clasp of those wasted, skeleton fingers, and with stern quietness, as though putting a force upon herself, she bent down and kissed his brow.

Then the door at the stairfoot opened once more, and Mary disengaged herself from her husband, and went a step forward towards her sons.

"Bill and Lot," said she, in the stillest, calmest

voice imaginable, "your father be come home. An' he do seem to be very ill, so I shannot go washin' to-day. Lot, run in an' ask Mary Morris to step up to Mrs. Curtis's instead o' me. She do know their ways every bit as well as I do. You don't need to tell her no more than I can't go myself, an' I'll feel kindly obliged if she'll take my place. Bill, light the fire, there's a dear lad, and tell Rachel to make haste an' come down. I do want her."

There was nothing in her tone to betray that the return of their father was not a perfectly natural and ordinary event. Giving orders in that steady voice she looked completely mistress of herself, and of the situation, whilst her husband's eyes were once more studying the ground, and her sons stood in blank amazement, Bill taking in the fact of his father's presence with the look of one that has received a terrible shock, Lot casting glances of inquiry at his brother in hopes of finding out what he ought to say or do.

Mary quietly went on, "Don't speak to your father now, boys. He do feel ill. Make haste and get your breakfasties, an' be off."

Much relieved to find he was not expected to do anything, Lot hastened to obey. Not so Bill. He stood stock still, his eyes fixed on his mother. She touched his arm, and beckoned him into the tiny pantry at the back of the house. "Bill," said she in a tone of admonition, "'tis your father."

Bill glanced back at the disreputable-looking figure, and shivered.

"You be his son, Bill! *Whatever*, you be his son."

"An' so I will do summat to help him, Mother. But he didn' ought to ha' come here, to sponge on your earnin's. We'll give him what do lie in our power, Mother, but he mustn't bide here. That be too much."

A quiver passed over Mary's face.

"The law do give him a right to," said she.

"Hang the law! But if that be the case (which I donnot believe), it don't make no differ. I'll take 'ee away from this here, an' he shan't know where we be gone to. It don't matter a brass farthing whether I be here or at Westhampton: I've got a pair of arms to work for 'ee wherever we be to."

"Oh, Bill, darlin', you be a dear son to I, but you don't understand nought about this," Mary answered. "Let alone the law, he be my husband still, dear lad, and your father, an' I took him for better for worse, don't 'ee know? An' I couldn' abear to turn un out, if 'twas ever so. Don't 'ee see how ill he be?"

"So long as he was well he stopped away."

Mary put her hand on her son's lips. "Don't say no more now, dear lad," said she; "go to thy work, an' turn it over in thy mind, an' I think thou'lt come to look at it different. You see, dear lad, it have took 'ee all on a sudden, but *I've* looked forward to it, an' thought what I'd do in it, a many year. I have, dear lad. He wasn't never one to stand up alone against trouble, Bill dear, an' I knowed trouble 'ould fall upon him soon or late; but I never thought on him bein' brought so low as he do seem to be, an' I thought if he were drove up an' hadn' no place else to go to, the day might be when he'd come home, an' so I wouldn' never

leave this house, dear—that's why you never couldn' persuade me—an' the door have never been bolted by night since the night he went away, for I knowed he'd come by night if he did come at all, an' I vowed in myself he should find no bolted door to turn un back . . . . an' the door o' my heart do stand open too."

The last words were spoken so low that they were scarcely audible, but Bill caught them. He kissed his mother, and went to his work in silence as she bade him, feeling half-choked with a rush of contending emotions. He was more tired with mental conflict than with bodily labour when the day was over, and he so much dreaded meeting his father, that he half resolved to spend the entire evening at a public-house. That would vex Mother, to be sure, but she will have no thoughts for him *now*, he grumbled to himself. However, in the first place, he resolved to go and see his sister Elizabeth Ann, who was living at Mrs. Champion's. His other sister was out of reach, in service at a distance; but Elizabeth Ann had a right to be told what had happened without delay, and he had a great longing to discover how the event which had been such a shock to himself would affect another.

At first he was gratified to find in her a sympathetic hardness of heart towards the returned wanderer. It showed, he said to himself, that that was the natural and just feeling. But his sister's sentiments were such a selfish caricature of his own, that it was not long before her way of expressing herself began to jar upon him. "Father had no right to come home in that beggarly way to disgrace them all." So far Bill

agreed. But he did not like to hear his sister say, "if she were Mother, she'd send him about his business, pretty quick. She'd soon teach him the way out o' the house." It was the very thing Bill had fancied himself eager that his mother should do, but the line of conduct did not sound mother-like, when laid down in his sister's sharp, uncompromising way. And could anything justify talking of one's father as a disreputable old wretch? Bill felt that there was something within him that cried out against it, though why, he asked himself, should there be? Was it not the truth? No; it is not that, it is 'Lizabeth Ann's selfishness disgusts him. How hateful to hear her say, that whatever others might do she washed her hands of it. Father had never done her any good, and she was not going to let him do her any harm. "Tell Mother not to let un come prowling up here, or it'll lose me my place. A nice thing to have a person like that inquirin' after one, an' sayin' he's your father! Tell Mother not to let un know I've money in the savings' bank. That's all he do want, I warrant. An' say my wages is very low. Don't you be such a fool as to gi' un money, Bill. It'll only bring un back upon 'ee. You shan't have a farthing o' mine towards it. An,' above all, don't let un come up here. Don't let un know where I be!"

"That's all you do think of, Liz! How selfish you be!"

"No, I ain't. Though, for that matter, a person *must* look to herself. I don't know who else will, if *he* don't. But as you do know very well, Bill, I'd do

anything for any o' my kin that's respectable. But they that do disgrace theirselves must bear their own burden. I've heard Grandmother say so scores o' times, an' I thought 'twas your maxim too, Bill."

Bill looked gloomy. "I do find a man can't work things out as he do see them in his own mind," said he. "Folk can't be kept separate, an' it do seem to I there's many a burden bows down the wrong back. But, good night, Lizy; you wouldn' know what I do mean, if I was to try to tell 'ee."

Mrs. Champion's house, though in a town, stood embowered in laurels and other evergreens, in the midst of its own garden. As Bill opened the door in the garden wall, he saw a little figure waiting in the street, and, almost before he perceived that it was his sister Rachel, she had darted across and seized his hand.

"Lot told me where he did think you was gone to, an' I be come to walk home with 'ee."

"I bain't comin' home not now."

"O yes you be," pursued the little maid, quite unmoved by the sullenness of Bill's tone, "'cause I do want 'ee to! An' Mother's got summat you be terrible fond of for supper."

"Did Mother send 'ee?"

"No; I come away of my own head. But Mother do want 'ee very special, that I do know. I do seem she be quite nervous wi' lookin' after 'ee; an' I thought 'twas very like you mid want to see some one, an' hear how things was afore comin' in, so I slipped out to meet with 'ee."

"How do Mother seem to be?" he asked, gloomily.

"Oh, Bill; so as I never see her afore! She do go about the house lookin' like—like I don't know what; summat as if she'd seen a ghost, I do fancy; an' by times she's cryin', an' by times she's callin' out as God is very good to her. An' the doctor have been, Bill; only I don't know what he did say, an' Mother have been out an' bought some clothes for Father, an' you don't know how much nicer he do look. An' I do seem 'tis all one as though 'twas the prodigal come home. . . . ."

"Do 'ee hold thy jaw, Rachie. I hate to hear folk bring up Scripture like that."

But whilst both in words and looks he was as ungracious as ever, his feet did not cease to tread the road home. Rachel, experienced in the ways of her class, passed every public-house that lay in their road with a beating heart and a vehement effort to look unconscious; but, to her great relief, her brother did not even slacken his steps. She was too much puzzled by his mood to venture any further remarks, so they went on together in silence, until at the very entrance of Freeman's Court their mother met them. She only said "My dear lad," and took Bill's hand in hers; but at that touch, and the confiding tenderness of her eyes, Bill felt a great throb of thankfulness that he had not yielded to the impulse to avoid home. Away went the jealous suggestion that Mother would not care *now* what *he* did, and in its stead there arose a determination to stand by her through thick and thin, do what she might.

Nevertheless, it was a relief to see no father downstairs when he entered the cottage, and the explanation that he was ill and gone to bed early was not unwelcome. Little was said by any one till after supper. Then Rachel and Lot were dismissed upstairs, and Bill and his mother sat together over the fire. There was much that he wished to say to her, but he did not know how to begin. All his plans seemed to be out of keeping with the steady, settled calmness of her countenance and manner. And before he had found any words she laid down her work, and looking fixedly at him, said:

"Bill dear, I sent for the doctor this mornin'."

"Ay, Rachie told me."

"An' he said, dear, that your poor father 'ont never have his health again."

"What did he say was the matter with un?"

"I can't azactly tell. 'Tis a reg'lar break up,' says he. But it do appear that your father catched a chill after a bad fever as he'd been down with, an' he won't never get over it, the doctor do say. He's that crippled wi' rheumatism he can't hardly drag hisself along."

"'Tis a very bad job, Mother! I doubt he'll never do a day's work again."

"I doubt he never won't, my son."

"An' so he do come to you to be took in an' done for? 'Tis right against justice, Mother. I wonder he weren't ashamed."

"Would you like better to see 'im in the Union Workhouse, Bill? 'Cause he hadn' no other refuge.

An' how do 'ee know he weren't ashamed? What did he come creepin' into the house by night for if he wasn't? Oh, Bill, my darlin', that have been my greatest comfort on earth all these weary years, don't pull against your mother now! Don't be hard on your father! When it do break my heart to see un brought down so low, an' the chief of what I do thank God for is, that he *have* come home to I at last. Think, Bill; could I bear to fancy un lyin' neglected in some beggar's hole? Or dyin' in a workhouse? An' he've been waitin', an' longin', an' not venturin' to come back this ever so long, an' the door standin' open for his hand all this time! No, Bill, lad, I've strength to work for un, an' a heart to forgive un without grudgin' whatever he've done against I. An' while he do live he's my husband, an' I do trust the Lord 'll spare me to do for un to the last."

Mary Basley did not get through this long speech without much trembling of lip and voice, and every now and then an interrupting sob. When she had done she lifted her apron to dry her tears, and waited for her son's reply.

It did not come very readily, but when it did it told her that nature and his mother had conquered. He would not be hard to his father any more.

"Mother," he said, "you be in the right of it, an' I don't care who says the contrary. An' whatever you do think right to do by Father I'll never say another word against."

And being a young man of few words, he kissed his mother and went to bed; but the next morning

(which was Sunday), it was his arm that helped the invalid down the steep little staircase, and settled him in the one wooden armchair; and when Mary heard him speak kindly to his father and ask him if he was comfortable, the tears rose to her eyes, and she hurried away upstairs, and, kneeling down, began to give thanks to God.

PART VIII.

ONE SINNER THAT REPENTETH.

"The world will not believe a man repents:
And this wise world of ours is mainly right.
Full seldom *does* a man repent, or use
Both grace and will to pick the vicious quitch
Of blood and custom wholly out of him,
And make all clean, and plant himself afresh.
But he has done it, weeding all his heart."

TENNYSON.

Mary Basley was, as we have already indicated, a woman of a peculiarly dependent and submissive nature. It was her lifelong habit to be guided by the counsels, and to yield to the wishes, of those around her in almost everything. Only by a painful effort could she ever bring herself to oppose or offend any of those whom she loved, or to whom she looked up.

But this softness of character was of that sort which has its roots not in weakness but in strength of soul, and therefore, when the occasion called for it, she was capable not only of thinking for herself, but also of unalterable firmness in adhering to her own line

of conduct, without regarding either opposition, condemnation, or persuasion.

Thus, when her husband returned to her, broken in health and spirits, appealing to her for help and care, without ever a word of asking forgiveness, she, herself reserved, and apt to shrink from translating feeling into speech, could open her heart to him, taking for granted that which he did not say, neither asking nor taking counsel, and without a single word about the matter to any one that she could possibly avoid speaking.

She said to her son that she had looked forward to this for many years, and indeed it by and by appeared as if she had anticipated every possible circumstance that could happen in connection with it, and considered how she would meet each, there was such a total absence of hesitaton or indecision about her plans.

She told her children that she had made up her mind to leave Freeman's Court at once.

"Folk would cast up what's past an' gone against your father," she said, in a low voice to Bill, who merely nodded, and answered:

"As you do like, Mother." And so prompt was she in making the needful arrangements, that even on Monday morning they were able to make a hurried flitting to the most distant quarter of the town where they had no acquaintances, and where Jem Basley could sit in the open doorway, when he was well enough, and enjoy the sunshine, without the fear of having to meet, from once familiar faces, cold glances of disapproval or condemnation.

Mary's instinct had not deceived her as to the line of conduct that would be adopted towards him. Old Hicks, it is true, was dead, but Jem's offence was by no means forgotten by others. It had excited such general reprobation, that he would have found it very difficult to go on living amongst old friends and neighbours. In the eyes of most of them it was an additional offence that he had dared to come back, and especially to come back in poverty and broken health, to be a helpless burden on the hands of his injured wife.

Not one of them had a single word to say to him; not one of them put the least faith in Mary's low, steady answer, to the indignant pity bestowed upon her for being once more afflicted with her husband's society, that Jem was a changed man and "terrible sorry for what he done, surely." His own father sternly declared that he would never either forgive him or see him; his mother, scarcely less sternly, sent word to Mary that she forgave, but would never see him—it would hurt her too much. Of all whom he had ever known and loved, there was but one whose hand did not shrink back from his, and that one was the wife whom he had wronged, almost, as people thought, past pardoning. Indeed, there were not wanting some who said she *ought* not to forgive him.

He said little of the life he had led since he left her. That it had been a miserable and wretched one was pretty nearly all that transpired. Of Jessie he only once spoke, with a shudder, and without naming

her name. She did not bide long with him, he said; she left him before the end of the first twelvemonth, and of her after-fate he knew nothing. From the day that he left his wife he had not known a single happy moment, and, after the first attack of rheumatic fever, ill-health never ceased to dog his steps. He wondered that he was alive when he thought of all he had gone through; but there was not much life left in him now, or else he should not have come back to be a burden.

So no doubt he imagined, but in truth it was to be far otherwise. Mary could not restore power to his crippled and enfeebled limbs, but nevertheless her tender care did revive him wonderfully, and by degrees it became plain that death was farther off than he supposed, and that he would, in all probability, drag on an invalid helpless existence for many years. The tears rose to his eyes when he extracted from his wife that this was the doctor's opinion, but he did not say anything. Hers were brimming over with compassion at the weariness to which he was doomed, and she began to speak cheerful courageous words of how well they were to do, and how comfortable she was going to make him; but he cut her short rather impatiently.

"*I* shall do very well," said he, in a tone that angered Bill, who thought he took his wife's devotion a great deal too much as a matter of course.

"But folk has often far more in their hearts than they can bring out in words," said Mary once, answering her son's thought.

No one could have been more dutiful and attentive than Bill Basley was in his behaviour to his father; but affectionate he could not, and did not, pretend to be. Mary felt that her son was not happy, and that the atmosphere of home had become constrained. Lot was so devoted to his eldest brother that he followed his lead in all things, even in the very spirit of what he did; and of all their children Rachel was the only one who seemed to feel any natural attraction to love her father. Mary's heart ached to think of all he had missed and lost, and at the same time it saddened her to see her children estranged from the home they had once loved dearly. It gave her a pang to think of parting with her Bill, and ceasing to see him daily; but she was too unselfish not to perceive that he would be better away, and, after a little while, she counselled him to an early marriage, and arranged that Lot should live with him. It would be better for Lot, she said. Bill was sensible of a sudden relief from oppression at the mere thought, but he resisted for a time. His mother wanted the help of the sum he contributed weekly to the household expenses, he thought. But no, she said she did not. With her own earnings, and the small parish allowance she received in consideration of her husband's sickness, she should do capitally. And so he yielded. Truly he was *not* happy at home. But his mother said, "Such a good son as you've been to me, will make a good husband. You'll be happy in your married life, darlin'." And he was so. He even learnt by his own bright fireside to think with a tolerance,

that was almost affection, of the father whose sins he had found it so hard to forgive.

And so months and years went by. And Mary's care became such an everyday thing to her husband that old habits of irritability began to return upon him, and he would often scold and find fault with her, as in days long gone by. But now he seldom gave way to his temper without remorse; and although he for a long time never said a word to make amends, he almost always showed by his manner that he was sorry. And at last a time came when a harsh word to his wife grew to be an exceedingly rare thing, and was never allowed to pass without acknowledgment and regret.

There was little perceptible change in his health from year to year. Severe attacks of rheumatic pain prostrated him from time to time, but they did not seem to leave him much weaker than he was before. Unless he was so ill as to require constant attendance, when his wife would give up going out to work, or his daughter would remain at home from school to wait upon him, he had to spend many hours of each day alone, and there was a time when he rebelled greatly against the life of monotony, dulness, and dependence he found himself forced to lead. There was no lack of sympathy with his irritated murmurs from either Rachel or her mother. Neither of them grudged him the relief of grumbling; and the comfort of his life was ever their first consideration. As Rachel grew up she told her mother she would never go to service like her sister, and planned to learn a trade, by which

she might maintain herself without leaving home. It was a favourite day-dream, how she was to be company for her father when her apprenticeship was past and she should begin to take in work on her own account, and she was never tired of planning what she and Father would do when that day came.

Meanwhile, however, she must be apprenticed, and during her apprenticeship must be more away from home than ever, and she feared he would miss her sadly, and dislike it very much. But instead of chafing more and more, at the weariness of the long days he had to spend more alone than ever, about this time Jem Basley seemed to grow less and less impatient every day. There were a few little household offices that his crippled state did not debar him from performing, and these he made a great point of taking upon himself; but from this time forwards the long leisure of his lonely days became increasingly absorbed in pursuits begun from a sense of duty, and in a spirit of blind, hesitating inquiry, when, not long after his return home, the first motions of real genuine repentance began to stir within him, and continued with an ever increasing relish and contentment; namely, the study of the Bible, and thought, and prayer.

Mary Basley was by nature ever ready to do a kindness. She soon became known in her new place of abode as a very good neighbour, a woman who could be depended upon for any of those good offices by which cottage wives are wont to lighten one another's load in times of sickness or trouble. She

was a good consoler too, having known sorrow herself. In return there were, after a time, plenty of people willing to show her invalid husband every possible kindness without troubling their heads about his past. If he felt lonely, there was company at his service; cottages where he would be welcomed as a visitor, or gossips glad to drop in to chat with him. But he did not care for this. During the long hours whilst his wife was gone out to work, and his daughter either away at school, or learning her trade, he led, by preference, a very solitary life. And in that still seclusion, that change passed over him which is called by so many names, and of which so many glaring counterfeits are blazoned abroad, but which, in very truth, is ever, as Saint Paul describes it, a passing from darkness to light, from death to life. A new creation it is also called, and in James Basley almost its first symptom was something utterly contrary to his natural character: a deep self-contempt and self-abhorrence, and an equally deep reverence for the simple, faithful goodness he saw in his wife. He who had once so openly and harshly looked down upon her and despised her, now in his thoughts exalted her as a living type of that goodness which it seemed to him his own stained soul could only behold afar off. If any one could have told him that this spotless wife should be drawn nearer to God by his unworthy hand, he would not have believed it. And yet so it was. She had trusted in God and tried to be good all her life, accepting what little she was taught about religion with obedient faith, but without trying much to understand it,

or to learn more. She went sometimes to church, but thought it was not a place intended for such an ignorant person as herself. Doubtless this simplicity is accepted by Him who went about all his life amongst poor unlearned folk and knew their ways and feelings; but yet there is a more excellent way; and it was from her husband in his deep repentance that Mary learnt it, and began to feel that personal, clinging *love* for a personal Saviour which is meant to be the heart and centre of the religious life, whether of the lowliest or the mightiest upon earth.

The part of Arleigh to which Mary had removed was once a hamlet distinct from the town, which had grown and enlarged until it had become a suburb. A church had recently been built to meet the wants of the increased population, and this church happened to be so close to the Basleys' abode that even Jem's slow and crippled steps could reach it without difficulty. There was a daily service there which he loved to attend, and in fine weather it was seldom indeed that his pale face and bent figure were not to be seen amongst the small congregation.

"Them that has leisure should pray for them that hasn't," he said once, when some remark was made in disparagement of this constancy, by a stern abhorrer of what she called "form and ceremony" in religion.

And, "My husband do like his church," Mary pleaded, in answer to the further objection that he could pray just as well at home.

This naturally led to an acquaintance with the clergyman, Mr. Arnold, a young man, ardent and

devoted, whose sermons, though somewhat too scholarly and refined to assimilate with the minds of most uneducated hearers, had materially assisted in the working of the new leaven in Jem Basley's soul; and soon their intercourse acquired a warmth which almost amounted to friendship. Each found in the other something that he himself had not. To Jem Basley the young clergyman was an inexhaustible mine of knowledge, able to solve the many questions which arose in his mind—or at any rate, to tell him if the questions were really unanswerable in this present life. To the young divine Jem Basley continually afforded glimpses of depths of spiritual experience utterly unknown and unfathomable to himself. Often and often, some word from Jem lit up with a sudden gleam of meaning some other word, historically known to him as the saying of some great master of the human soul in the olden time, which, until then, had been to him merely a grand phrase, nothing more.

Only one thing astonished him, and seemed inconsistent with the rest. When he took an opportunity of expressing his surprise that Jem, so constant at church, so evidently *real* in his religion, *never* presented himself at the Lord's table, he was almost shocked at the vehemence with which he begged him never to speak of such a thing again, he was not fit. He refused to argue on the subject: and when the clergyman would have exhorted and encouraged, stopped him by saying, "You don't know nothin' about it, Sir."

Disappointed, Mr. Arnold consoled himself with

preaching a sermon intended to meet the most popular objections to communicating, and hoped that it might lead Jem to resume the subject; but months and years went by, and they met often, and discussed many things, but on that one point Jem gave no sign.

But, in truth, Mr. Arnold was utterly ignorant of Jem's history. It may have been some remnant of old Adam lurking in his heart that made him shrink from revealing to the gentleman friend, whose society he had learnt to value, the disgraceful story of his past life. It may have been simply the unconquerable reserve of his nature. In all the talk they had together, he very seldom spoke of himself; and though on the rare occasions when he did so he had been far from making himself out better than he was, he had not been conscious how little real weight Mr. Arnold attached to his expressions of self-depreciation.

At last, however, a time came when some inward feeling impelled him to tell the whole truth; a time when his sufferings had been more frequent than usual, so much so as to lead him to think that death must really be drawing near at last.

Mr. Arnold came to see him one day when the pain had been for hours more than usually severe, though, in answer to the clergyman's inquiries, he made rather light of it.

"You take it very patiently," said Mr. Arnold, kindly; "but, from what your wife says, I fear it has been worse than you will admit."

Jem attempted no denial. He was silent for a

moment, whilst a curious half-smile played on his lips.

"And we indeed receive the just reward of our deeds," he said, in a low voice, with evident effort. Then rapidly, as if to cover that betrayal of his secret thought, he went on:

" 'Tis some years ago now, Sir, since you did ask me, why didn' I come to the Lord's table? You wouldn' have asked me that, Sir, if you'd known what my past life have been. And it have come into my mind o' late that I didn' ought to have kep' it back from you, seeing how much kindness you've showed me, Sir, an' how different you do perhaps think o' me to what is correct. So, if you'd do me the favour to hear me out, I should wish to tell you about it now."

And he did tell him. That he extenuated nothing is very certain, and the pain of confession seemed as keen and fresh as though his offences had been committed but the day before. It is not so certain that he set down nought in malice; for those were days when his better self was often hard as iron to his worse, and he was ruthless towards any latent self-exculpation that he might detect in his own mind.

It was a great shock to the young clergyman to hear such a confession from the lips of a man for whom he had long cherished such a respectful regard as we only accord to a very few of our fellow-travellers on the journey of life. And Jem's foreboding was true: Mr. Arnold's feeling towards him *was* altered by the knowledge that his past had been

so deeply stained. It is not every one that has it in him to honour repentance as it should be honoured. Mr. Arnold believed, theoretically, that it cancelled sin; practically he thought the stains of some sins indelible. Nevertheless, he was able to speak to the point, and with feeling; and Jem felt great relief at having disburthened his mind. But when he was reminded that all the promises of Scripture are to the penitent, and loving Bible words were quoted which seemed specially to invite such as he was to the table of the Lord, he still hung back. "I don't doubt *His* forgiveness," he said in a voice of deep feeling, "but I don't forgive myself, nor yet my fellow-creatures don't forgive me. There's many would be sore shocked to see *me* goin' up to the Lord's table." And to this decision he continually adhered. "Only, Sir, when I'm upon my deathbed," he said, "then, if you don't think it unfit, it couldn't scandalize nobody, an' I would like to eat that bread o' life afore I die, an' remember my Lord's death the same as He ordered us to. An' Mary, she do say she won't never draw near till I do; she 'ould be with me then."

It was not what the clergyman desired, but nothing else could be obtained. And the time came sooner than he expected. Only a few months passed by and then there was a hasty summons by Rachel, looking agitated and alarmed; and Mr. Arnold found Jem Basley calm and steadfast, but in great pain and certainly dying, for the rheumatism was attacking the heart. . . . .

He thought he never would forget the rapt expres-

sion of the sufferer's countenance when the sacred service was concluded. The end was evidently not far off, and he would have liked to remain till all was over, but some instinct told him that the dying man wished to be alone with his near kindred, and he took his leave for a time. Two sons were in the cottage, besides Rachel and her mother, and one of the sons had partaken of the Communion, and afterwards, rising from his knees—doubtless through ignorance, the clergyman thought—before the service was over, had very gravely and solemnly kissed his father on the forehead.

But when Mr. Arnold was gone, and Lot and Rachel creeping upstairs joined the others in the watch round their father's bed, not even Rachel distracted for a single moment her father's glance from her mother's face. Mary's hand was in her husband's, her eyes fastened upon his.

"Mary," he said, in a weak but unfaltering voice, "Mary, my wife, I owe thee my salvation! That night I came back to thee I was a desperate man. I was that wretched I couldn' bear my life. God forgive me, I went down by the river-side so far as the docks, an' meaned to throw myself in, an' the thought come to me so sudden as if an angel had spoke it in my ear, Go home to thy wife, an' see if she 'on't forgive thee, an' if not there be the river still. An' I went. But oh, my dear, a very little 'ould ha' turned me back. If you'd been hard to me, I should surely ha' gone back an' drowned myself. I surely should, Mary. But you saved me from death! Body

an' soul you saved me from death. For I shouldn' never have thought o' lookin' for God's forgiveness if I hadn' got yours first. But now". . . . A bright smile illuminated his whole countenance. He tried to go on speaking, but his words were broken and indistinguishable. Only he feebly pointed upwards with one hand, and Mary fancied she read in his eyes an eagerness to make her understand some overwhelming bliss which he had no power to express.

When Mr. Arnold called again a few hours later he found James Basley dead, and the new-made widow sitting by the side of the body, shedding tears like the rain, but interrupting her grief to say, amidst her sobs, that no woman in the world ever had so much to thank God for as she had.

MY SISTER ROSA.

"A dream came slowly nigh me, all my thoughts and fancy leading
Across the bounds of waking life to the other side."

JEAN INGELOW.

"DO tell us about your sister Rosa, Mrs. Horncastle," we pleaded, as we sat comfortably round the fire in the housekeeper's room at Blissett, whilst, outside, the rain was pelting furiously against the deep-set windows. It was too violent to last long; and Mrs. Horncastle, after drying our wet garments and hospitably entertaining us with tea and bread and butter, had recommended us to wait patiently where we were for another hour, by which time, she predicted, the weather would probably clear up, and we should be able without inconvenience to set out on our homeward way.

There were three of us, my two cousins and myself, and we had imprudently started to walk to Blissett on a treacherously bright afternoon in May, without giving a moment's thought to the coming storm, whose certain approach even a child might have foretold, merely because my youngest cousin, Lilian, had expressed an idle wish to pay a visit to the fine

old Hall, which was indeed well worth seeing, both within and without; but then, any other day would have done just as well for looking at it.

Mrs. Horncastle was a privileged person, and scolded us without reserve for our folly, even whilst she showed us over the house with great pride and pleasure, professed herself delighted to see us, and did all that lay in her power to make us comfortable. The Blissett family was abroad, and life at the Hall must have been very monotonous in their absence, so that the rare event of a visit from anybody could not but be felt to be an agreeable variety. Besides which, I was rather a favourite with Mrs. Horncastle, and was used to receive a hearty welcome from her; and my pretty cousin Lilian was so bright and fresh in appearance, and so winning and engaging in manner, that she never failed to take all hearts by storm wherever she went.

Everybody who visited at Blissett knew Mrs. Horncastle. She had lived there, first as nurse and afterwards as housekeeper, for more than ten years, and had become by degrees the very mainspring of household comfort, without whom nothing could go on well. She was a sailor's widow, and had known her mistress, Mrs. Blissett, long before she was married, when, in the days of her maidenhood and childhood, she had lived in the little seaport town of which her father was the clergyman. That little town was Mrs. Horncastle's birthplace, and all her early life was spent there, amidst the various sights and sounds peculiar to the sea-side. Very much did she miss the salt water, the

rippling and rushing of the waves, the smell of fish and seaweed and the sight of the boats going out and returning, when first she came to live at Blissett. Inland life seemed sadly tame and silent to her, and she was much inclined to grieve for her old home on the coast; but being a very practical person, and strongly attached to Mrs. Blissett, she openly gave out that she considered herself a fool for hankering after things merely because she had been accustomed to them, and, determined to conquer a feeling which she regarded as a sentimental weakness, ridiculous in a middle-aged widow like herself, she settled down to her work with cheerful resolution, and soon grew quite reconciled to the change.

Nevertheless, there was always a certain air, a something, I hardly know what, about her, that made one involuntarily think of the sea. Perhaps it was, that, having been born within hearing of the salt waves, she could never lose the recollection of their old familiar sound. It haunted her, and, as it were, imparted a kind of *sea-tinge* to all her thoughts and sentiments. Moreover, she had been brought up amongst people who cherished all sorts of odd, superstitious fancies, which are still current amongst sailors and fishermen. These things clung to her like a cradle-song, learnt in childhood and never forgotten; they gave a touch of romance to what seemed, in other respects, to be an exceedingly prosy and matter-of-fact character.

Her stories of dreams and visitations, of mermaids and mermen, and of drowned or shipwrecked mari-

ners, were the delight and terror of the Blissetts' childhood; and, long after the elder ones had outgrown the nursery, it was still considered a great treat to draw Mrs. Horncastle out, and to induce her to relate one of the old tales that she used to tell so well.

Many of these tales were well known to me, for much of my childhood had been spent in the Blissett nursery and schoolroom; but there was one which I had never had the luck to hear, which yet the young Blissetts used to say was the very best of all. "Mother Horncastle's" stories, and this was the story of her sister Rosa.

It was Lilian who whispered to me, "Get Mother Horncastle to tell us one of her stories. Do! It would pass away the time so nicely." And it was I who began to beg for this particular tale. I had never heard it, I observed, and I wished to hear it so much!

Mrs. Horncastle was proud of her acknowledged talent for telling stories, and liked nothing better than to be asked for one; but, nevertheless, she did not at once comply with my request. The story that I asked for was one that lay very near her heart, and I knew well that it was only sometimes, and to a favoured few, that she could ever be induced to relate it.

She looked doubtfully, almost wistfully, at us, as though to make sure that we were not people of the incredulous and sceptical sort, who would annoy her by not possessing faith enough to receive her tale

with due respect; and altogether she hesitated so much, that I began to think she was going to decline positively to relate it, or to put us off with something else.

But Lilian was one of those happy people to whom all persuasive arts seem to come by nature. It was very seldom that she had to beg for anything in vain. She brought a little gentle coaxing and innocent flattery to bear upon Mrs. Horncastle, and the good woman was quite incapable of holding out against it. Resting her chin on her hand, as if to collect her thoughts, she meditated for a few moments, and then said, with first a sigh and then a smile—

"Well, there, if you do care to hear it, so you shall!

And forthwith she began to relate to us the following story, which I intend to set down, as nearly as possible, in her own words. But first I may as well observe, that, once having fairly consented to relate this story, all Mrs. Horncastle's backwardness to approach the subject appeared to vanish. From the first word to the last it seemed to be a real pleasure to her to tell the tale; and warming as she proceeded, and pleased with the evident interest with which we listened, she told it so well that she moved us all to tears before she had concluded, and thoroughly infected us with her own entire conviction of the absolute truth and reality of every circumstance that she related to us.

"'Tis a curious thing when you come to think of it," she said, laying her hands on her knees, whilst

she gently tipped her chair, and looked thoughtfully into the fire; "'tis a curious thing how apt families are to run all into the same line.

"'Twas so in our family. Father was a sailor, and mother was a fisherman's daughter, and my two brothers they both went to sea, and me and my sisters we all married seafaring men. I've been twice married myself; and both times 'twas to a sailor!

"Me and George Otway was neither of us twenty years old when we was wedded, and you wouldn't believe how bare we was of furniture, and most everything else, when we began to keep house. But what did we care? We was as happy as the days was long. Not that we didn't quarrel sometimes. We had our little 'miffs' the same as other folk, for we was both of us quick tempers; and George used to be jealous sometimes, and fire up like anything if any other man did but look as if he thought me pretty, though I'm sure I never gave him no cause, except now and then just to torment him. And pretty I was, there's no denying it, and how could folk help seeing it? I used to tell George I was sure he'd like to shut me up, just like a Turk, and never let no one see me. But, there, they never lasted long, not our quarrels didn't, and we used to be better friends than ever afterwards. 'Twas all storm and sunshine with us; and we was more like a couple o' children playing at lovers than like steady married folk. Mother used to say so often.

"But for all that, them two years that I was married to George Otway was the cream of my life; and,

to my mind, it's been nothing but skim milk ever since, though 'tis ungrateful of me to say so—very ungrateful—for there couldn't be a better husband than Horncastle was to me all the years we lived together, nor a better stepfather to my two fatherless children that George left me with; and I hope I made him comfortable, and wasn't a bad wife to him, for 'twasn't his fault that my light heart was gone when I married him. When George was drowned I thought I'd never wed again, and I went to service; but the best of good places isn't a home, specially to a *young* woman, and I pined away dreadful, a-wanting my children and my own fireside; and when Horncastle spoke of taking care of me, and being a father to the lads, what could I do?

"But what a woman I am to go on talking about myself like this, when 'twas Rosa that I was to tell you about.

"Rosa was my youngest sister, and, as Mother never had another child after she was born, she was always made a pet of from her very cradle. Me and my other sister was Martha and Mary, and the boys was Esau and Jacob; and when Rosa was born, father wanted to look out a Scripture name for her too; but she was dark, instead of fair like the rest of us, so Mother took it into her head that she was going to grow up like an aunt of her mother's that had been dark, and very handsome, and had made a great match, and set her heart on naming the baby after her.

"Mother said, maybe the name would bring the child some of Aunt Rosa's luck. But Father didn't

half like it, though he let Mother have her way, as he generally did; 'but,' said he, 'Scripture names was much more likely to bring a body luck, if it came to talking about that, than the names of anybody's aunts.'

"Rosa did not grow up what folk generally call handsome. She was small and dark, and, except at home, nobody ever thought her a beauty. But, for all that, she had a way of creeping into folk's hearts, and nestling down in the warmest corner; for there wasn't one of us that didn't make a favourite of her, though each of us used to call out on the rest for spoiling of her. As to Father and Mother, Rosa could turn 'em both round her fingers, and do what she liked with them, though they used to keep a tight hand over the rest of us, when *we* was children.

"I don't know that Rosa was much spoilt by it. Folk said she was, because she grew up as delicate and particular as a lady; but my belief is that that was the nature of her, and not all the scolding and hardening in the world would have got it out of her. Besides, as far as I've been able to see, there's many more children spoilt by too much scolding than by too little; and I think, and so did Mother, that if Rosa had been made to rough it like the rest of us, it would just have killed her.

"And we couldn't have spared her; for the child was a great blessing in the house! There was quick tempers and high spirits amongst us, and sometimes we used to get angry, and be a bit rough to one another; but Rosa was always as gentle as sunshine

in April, and couldn't abide loud voices and rude words, and, as she was everybody's pet, she was never afraid of saying anything she wanted to say; and I've seen her make peace over and over again, without seeming to take any trouble about it.

"She and I was great friends, for she was only four years younger, and we understood one another's ways. She had ways of her own, had Rosa, for all she was such a quiet little creature, as you'd think would listen to anybody; and she took great delight in her own thoughts. I've seen that child sit a full hour at our sitting-room window, a-watching of the shadows of the clouds on the sea, and she'd know no more that she was a-sitting there, a-wasting of her time with doing nothing, than as if she'd been to sleep. Mother wouldn't have stood it from me nor yet from Martha; but Rosa might do anything! She wouldn't so much as let her be laughed at for going to sleep with her eyes open, like Father used to call it, 'cause Rosa would start and colour, like a person just woke up, and look *that* ashamed! And then Mother would say she wouldn't have the maid vexed. Ah, poor Mother! How terrible fond she was of Rosa!

"When we was alone together, Rosa used sometimes to tell me wonderful fancies that she had about all sorts of things that most folk don't take much notice of, such as the sea, and the stars, and the sun's light on the water, and the ships sailing away to the edge of the world.

"I never vexed her and told her the world hadn't got any edge, same as some folk would have done, so

she'd talk to me as free as though she was thinking out loud, and I loved to hear her. Her fancies was such, that you'd have thought, I dare say, that she must have got 'em out of books; but 'twasn't so. The only book that she ever read much in was the Bible, and her fancies came straight out of her own head. But she kept 'em very close, in general, for she couldn't abide to have 'em laughed at, nor yet have folk ask whatever did she mean.

"She was one who was very slow to care for anybody outside of her own home; and I, who knew the ways of her, used to wonder, often and often, if she'd ever come to have a follower, and keep company with any one, same as any other young maid. I'm sure she wasn't just like other folk, though there's no doubt but what we may have set too great store by her, and it did always seem to me as though there wasn't a lad in the place that didn't look somehow rough and common alongside of she. 'Tis true there was some of 'em as let her see they was willing enough to 'walk with her' if she'd let 'em, but they never knew what to say to her, and she gave 'em no encouragement. Sometimes Father would say:

"'What, ain't there none of 'em good enough for 'ee, Rosa?'

"And she'd laugh, and give him a kiss, and tell him she'd never seen the lad she liked half as well as she liked him; and she didn't want no husband, he'd never let her have her own way same as she had it at home.

"But, there, 'tis all very well talking, till the right

man comes; and when the right man came to Rosa she was just as ready to leave father and mother and home for his sake, as though she'd been looking out for a sweetheart ever since she was fifteen.

"'Twas a brother of my first husband George Otway's; Oliver Otway was his name. The ship that he was in took fire, but all the crew was brought off in boats: only one of the boats must have been lost, for 'twas never heard of again; but the one Oliver was in had better luck, and they got off safe to a desolate island somewhere or other in the sea, but I don't rightly know where. There they made a shift to live as well as they could, hoping from day to day some ship would come and take them off; but none did come for more than two years, and when she came there wasn't but four of them left alive, and Oliver Otway was one. All the others was dead of want and misery. Folk was very kind to them, and a sum of money was collected to clothe 'em and bring 'em home, and Oliver came straight to Westhead, where I used to live when George was alive, because he and George was orphans, and he hadn't another near relation in the world. He was terrible upset, poor fellow, when he found George was dead and me married to Horncastle, when he'd left us a couple of young, new-married folk, as fond and happy as could be. But he came on all the same to Datchett, where I was living, o' purpose to see me, and broke down, poor fellow, and fairly cried, when he took my two little lads, George's children, in his arms.

"I don't think he ever forgave me in his heart for

marrying again so quick, though he said he did, when he saw how good Horncastle was to the children. He stopped some days in the village, o' purpose to find out how they was treated, though I didn't know at the time that that was what he was a-staying for; and after that he stayed on because he had got acquainted with Rosa, and I don't think he'd seen her more than twice, afore any stranger who saw 'em together could tell that all the man's heart was set on making her his wife.

"It was some time though afore he plucked up courage to tell her so. To see the way he treated her you'd have thought she was a angel as had taken lodgings in this world for a little while, and not merely a quiet, decent sort of maid, as was used to be rather too much made of at home—which was what the Datchett folk mostly said of her.

"I never see a girl more mad in love with any one than Rosa was with him. Her eyes would get bright and her cheeks would flush if she did but hear his step outside the door, and no one could help seeing how she'd sit and hearken to every word he said, glowing and turning pale by fits and starts, and coaxing Father, when Oliver was out of the way, to put questions to him about the desolate island, and other places he used to tell of, as she was too shamefaced to ask herself. She couldn't a-bear to have it noticed, though.

"I mind her fairly bursting out crying one day, and running upstairs to hide herself, because Father joked her a little. Mother ran up after her and tried to bring her down to supper, for Oliver Otway

had come not a minute after Rosa flew off, and anybody could see he missed her, though he didn't ask after her. He kept watching the door in such a wistful-like way. But Rosa wouldn't come down. 'I can't, I can't, Mother,' was all she'd say; 'I'll come presently if you'll let me alone.' And not a bit would she show herself till Oliver was out of the house, and then came in as quiet as you like, though Mother said her cheeks had been as hot as fire when she left her.

"Ah well, we all thought, then, that Rosa might do worse than marry Oliver Otway, a steady, respectable man, with money in the savings' bank, and earning good wages. True it is, as Mother used to say, 'a sailor's wife has an anxious life,' but we'd lived all our lives amongst sailors, and never gave that a thought. Me and Martha was both of us married to sailors, and we looked to see Rosa the same.

"And so she was. The very next day after that evening when Rosa wouldn't come to supper, Oliver spoke, and a month after that they was married. Ah me, ah me! And now they're both dead and gone —both of them. . . .

"But I'm going on too fast. I oughn't to have said that yet; I shall come to it soon enough, and too soon, in its proper place.

"They was married, as I was saying, and they went away to Westhead to live, because it was more handy for Oliver to be at a bigger place than Datchett, and they thought that by that means they'd see more of one another.

"For a time all went very well. Rosa was a pretty good scholar, and first-rate at letter-writing, so Mother used to hear from her every week. She used to bring the letters to me to read to her, because she couldn't read writing herself; and upon all the letters it was written how happy Rosa was, and how good Oliver was to her; and how Westhead was a large town, and there were too many folk there to please her; it was nothing near such a nice place as Datchett, but she cared nothing for that as long as she and Oliver could be together. After a while, however, there came a change.

"You'd have thought, wouldn't you, that, after all he'd gone through, Oliver Otway would have been thankful to bide at home, and not want to go sailing off to the ends of the earth again? But 'twasn't so.

"You couldn't have found a man more fond o' home than Oliver Otway was, nor you couldn't have found a man more impossible to keep at home for more than a short spell at a time.

"There was a feeling in his heart that was always a-urging of him to start off somewhere, and making him as restless as restless.

"That there feeling come over him afore he'd been many months married. Three weeks was the most he was ever away from home at first, a-taking of short trips in coasting vessels; but after a while he began to weary o' that, and to want sore to get farther away. Howsoever, he waited very patient until Rosa's first child was born; and then, when he could leave her with the baby in her arms, says he, 'Rosa, my girl

do 'ee think you can make yourself happy wi' the young un for a bit? 'Cause I must get out o' this—I can't stand this creepin' sort o' life not no longer, I can't.'

"'It breaks my heart to think of it,' says Rosa. But she began to get his things ready for all that, for she knew she must let un go. She had noticed how uneasy he'd been for months past, a-tossing and a-starting in his sleep, and having no heart to his victuals, and she knew he was fretting to get away; 'twasn't in the nature of the man to bide long in one place, and after all, 'twas the daring and venturesomeness of him that caught Rosa's fancy at first.

"So he went; but, to please Rosa, he wasn't away but six months. I can't rightly remember where 'twas he went to, but I think 'twas the Black Sea. Rosa fretted sorely after he was gone. 'I dream of Oliver most nights,' she wrote, 'and all day long I think of him. Baby is my only joy, and I think he favours his father.' . . . .

"'Ah,' cried poor Mother, when I read this out, 'Rosa didn't ought to have married a sailor!'

"When Oliver come home safe she was almost beside herself with joy, and so, for that matter, was he, to see her again. Poor Rosa! She fancied now he'd be content to bide along of her, and leave off wishing to go long voyages. 'Twas just the contrary. He had had a taste of the old seafaring life that he'd been brought up to, and Rosa might just as well have tried to get a fish to be comfortable in a washtub.

"Nothing would satisfy him now but a real long voyage, and it wasn't long afore we heard that he'd engaged himself to go to China, and was to be away two years. Horncastle and he was to make the voyage together, and engaged to sail in the same ship. A week or two after they sailed, Rosa broke up housekeeping and come to live with Father and Mother. They was uncommon pleased to have her, for they had neither son nor daughter living at home, and Rosa was their favourite, as I've told you. She was rather weak in her health too, and wanted Mother's care.

"It went to our hearts to see how melancholy she was, and how little pleasure she seemed to take in anything. Sweet and loving to Father and Mother she always was, and 'twas a pretty sight to watch her fond ways with her little one; but she was got to be more silent and dreamy than ever she was, and would sit for hours without speaking a word, and she'd sigh to herself in a quiet way that almost drove Mother crazy to listen to.

"I've heard tell when I was young that when anybody sighs like that there, a drop o' blood goes from the heart with every sigh.

"I believe 'twas just so with Rosa. She sighed and sighed, and every day she got paler and thinner, and her eyes got to look ever so much larger than natural; her face was fallen away so much.

"'Rosa, you didn't ought to fret so,' said I to her; 'you be wearin' yourself to death, and will never live till your man do come home if you don't look out.

You don't see me go on so about Horncastle. I puts my trust in the Almighty, and looks to see him return safe.'

"'I can't help it. Oh, how I wish I could!' she answered me, with a quivering lip. 'Oh, Mary, Mary, I can't get it out of my head that Oliver won't never come home.'

"Then she fell a-crying, and I a-comforting of her. And I think it did her good to have let out what was in her heart; for, after that, she did cheer up a little, and all the more because she got a letter from her husband just about that time. I got none from Horncastle, who was never a scholar, but Oliver wrote that he was well, and sent his love to me. That was enough for me, for I wasn't given to troubling and thinking things would turn out wrong. But Rosa was real foolish about her letter. Waking or sleeping she never parted from it; she never tired of reading it, though I know she must have known every word of it by heart afore she'd had it a week; and I've seen her kiss that bit o' written paper, when she thought nobody saw her, as though it had been a creature that had sense.

"I told Mother of the low-spirited notions Rosa had taken into her head, but she didn't think much of them. 'She'll be better after her child is born,' she said. But then, it was never Mother's way to think much of fancies.

"Well, months went on, and Rosa's time drew near. She'd had two more letters from Oliver, and had grown a bit cheerfuller. One of the young ladies

up at the Vicarage was going to be married, and Rosa got the making of all her under-things to do. Rosa was a most beautiful needlewoman, and afore she was married, whenever any person in Datchett wanted any sewing done that was above the common, 'twas Rosa mostly got it to do.

"Folks say that sewing work is dreadful underpaid; and so 'tis, for the common sorts; but fine sewing will always get a good price, and a body that is real clever with her needle will never want work.

"What Oliver allowed Rosa out of his wages was more than enough for her and the child to live on; but she used to like to think she was adding to their means by what she earned with her needle. It helped wonderfully to make the time seem shorter when he was away in the Black Sea; but somehow, after he was gone to China, Rosa lost heart, and took no pride in her work. She didn't care much whether she got it or not, and when any person gave her a job, nothing any one could say would make her hurry, or bind herself to finish by a certain time.

"Mother was quite frightened when she got Miss Emily's trousseau to do.

"'What a piece o' work there'll be,' she said to me, 'if Rosa ain't ready with it in time.'

"But Rosa settled down to the job as I hadn' seen her settle to anything since she came to Datchett. There was pretty new patterns to make everything by, and nice embroidery and lace edging for the trimmings, all dainty and complete as Rosa could fancy.

"'Tis a pleasure to do such work as this,' she said one day.

"'And no doubt but what it will bring in a good bit o' money,' I answered.

"'Ay,' said she, and was silent for a bit. Then she sighed, and, 'It will be something for the child, at any rate,' she said.

"'Oh, do 'ee put them gloomy thoughts out o' your mind, Rosa,' said I. For I knew very well what 'twas she was thinking of.

"She smiled, and shook her head. 'I can put the hair back from my face,' she said, a-pushing it behind her ears with her little hand, 'but I can't put thoughts out o' my mind. How can I, Mary? They come without fetching, and they'll go without sending. I can't help it, Mary, if birds of ill omen have built their nests in my heart.'

"By which I saw, that though Rosa might *seem* cheerfuller, she was just as full of fears and fancies as ever she was. But no doubt but what she *was* cheerfuller through taking in that pretty sewing to do.

"One morning—'twas towards the middle of October, and Miss Emily's wedding-day wasn't more than a week off—Rosa came down looking so pale that Mother began to beg of her to go and lie down again. It had been blowing a gale of wind all night, and I don't suppose the poor child had closed her eyes once.

"She shivered and trembled, and could touch no breakfast, but she wouldn't do as Mother said.

"'I thought the night would never end, Mother,'

she said, 'and I'm so glad 'tis morning. I'd a deal rather stop with you than go upstairs again.'

"'Well, please yourself, my dear maid,' said Mother; and then Rosa took up her work, and said she was very anxious to finish off that day, because there wasn't but a few stitches left; and she looked with pride at the great pile of finished work ready to go to the Vicarage.

"'I hope my work won't bring Miss Emily no ill-luck!' she cried out on a sudden, as though she couldn't keep back the words, and then sat down in the window and tried to sew.

"But after a very little while she looked up to Mother, and said she, 'Mother, you be right. I don't just feel well this morning. I think I must lie down for a bit.'

"Said Mother, 'So do 'ee, my dear.' So Rosa stooped down and kissed her little boy, as was sitting on a little stool by Mother, and then laid by her work and went upstairs. Mother followed her, and covered her over with a shawl, and told her to try and sleep a bit, and then came down and left her; and soon after I came in (I lived very close at hand), and sat a while talking with Mother, and Mother said to me that she thought Rosa was going to be took ill, and she should be glad when 'twas over, for she wasn't quite easy about her.

"We sat there talking for a long while, and Rosa's boy was fractious, so I took him on my knee, and rocked him in my arms till he fell asleep, as he generally did in the morning; and I was just looking

about for a place to lay him down, for I wanted to be going home, when Mother said, 'Hark,' and we both fancied we heard something like a stifled cry from the upstairs room.'

"Mother started up to go to Rosa, but, afore she could move, we heard Rosa's foot on the stairs; and in another moment the door at the stair-foot was thrown open, and we saw Rosa standing in the doorway looking like a ghost just risen from the grave.

"Never to my dying day shall I forget her look, and I was glad to my heart that the child was asleep, or I think he'd have screamed with terror at the sight of his own mother.

"Her face was as white as death, and her dark hair, which was falling about her shoulders, made her look the whiter. Her eyes shone so bright and wild I thought she was going mad.

"'Oliver . . . I've seen . . . Oliver,' she moved her lips to say. She could not bring out a sound, for all that she made a great effort; but either we knew what she said by the motion of her lips, or else 'twas her eyes told us, for both Mother and I was very sure what 'twas; and then, afore Mother could rush to help her, she sank down all in a heap at the stair-foot.

"We raised her up, and Mother and me between us carried her upstairs, and laid her on the bed.

"'Oliver wants me,' was her first words when she come to herself; 'he's dead, Mother, he's dead.'

"Mother gave a heart-broken look across to me, and shook her head in a sort of despair.

"'You've been dreaming, my sweet,' said she, lean-

ing down to kiss Rosa. 'You don't know rightly where you be. You be at home in Mother's bed, and Oliver's away sailing on the sea, and God's in the sky a-taking care of us all. Mind that, my dear.'

"'Ay, I've been dreaming,' said Rosa. 'I saw Oliver's ship a-sailing on the sea . . . . and the sun was near to setting . . . . and I saw Oliver fall overboard . . . . and they let down a rope to him . . . . . and he swam after the ship . . . . and the sea was as quiet as quiet . . . . and the folk in the ship stretched out their hands to Oliver, and I thought they was like saints in heaven a-stretching out their arms to a poor lost soul; and I watched to see why they was so eager . . . . and I saw a big fish a-following of Oliver . . . and Oliver knew it, and strained hisself to get away . . . . and the folk in the ship knew it, and shouted and made a noise to frighten the fish . . . . and *I* knew it, and wanted to call on God, but something seemed to have got fast hold of me so that I could not move body or soul . . . . and I fought and struggled to speak . . . . and Oliver was quite close to the ship . . . . and the folk screamed and shouted . . . . and the fish was very near . . . . greedy, and eager, and wicked . . . . and all of a sudden I thought there was a great shriek, and some one hid my eyes, and I found voice to cry out . . . . and woke.'

"'It was a dream,' cried Mother, clasping her arms tight round Rosa, 'it was a dream.'

"'But, then,' my sister continued, 'when I woke, I saw Oliver. Wet and dripping he stood by my side, with death in his face. And I . . . I don't know that

I spoke; . . . but I said in my heart, . . . "My own, my own love, living or dead the same," . . . and I stretched out my hands to him. And I thought he smiled, . . . just his old smile, . . . and said, "Rosa," and he was gone!'

"'It was a dream,' Mother cried again; 'Rosa, my little one, it was a dream.'

"Rosa did not answer. . . . .

"That was the beginning of a very sad day. Poor Rosa's infant was born in the evening, and neither the babe nor its mother lived to see another morning's light.

"Ah, 'twas cruel work to see the pet of the family struggling with pain and death, and not to be able to do anything to help her. Father couldn't abear the sight, but sat downstairs, crying, most all night. Mother never left her for one moment, and I was with her the most part of the time, though I stepped down now and then to say a word to Father. But no one could do anything for her.

"Just a little before she died, she said—

"'Where's Teddy?'

"And I brought her little boy and laid him by her. 'Twas pretty to see her try to fondle the child.

"After a bit, 'Mother,' says she, 'this child's yours, ain't it?'

"'Ay, my dear, ay,' said Mother.

"'Yours and Father's,' says she; 'yours and Father's. You'll mind he was your Rosa's child, and she give him to you. . . . Take him up in your arms, Mother: . . . let me see him in your arms.'

"Poor Mother! She took up the child, and kissed him, and wept over him.

"Then the minister that we'd fetched to baptize the baby came up, and knelt down and prayed a long while by Rosa's bed.

"Rosa was yet living when he left the house, but 'twasn't long after that she died, with a smile on her lips, like the smile she came into the house with the day Oliver asked her to be his wife; and we laid her dead infant beside her in the morning.

"That tall young chap, with the bright eyes, you noticed up to Mother's that time you was staying at Datchett, Miss Isabel, is Rosa's child. I think, if it hadn't been for Teddy, Mother would never have got over Rosa's death. It made an old woman of her at once, and afore that, Mother had always been thought very young for her years. But she's wonderful fond of Teddy, and so is he of her."

"And Oliver Otway never came home?" asked the listeners.

"No," continued Mrs. Horncastle, "no. There's many things happens no one can explain. . . . He died, my dears, he died, just as Rosa saw in her dream. And about that time, too, as far as we can make out; only 'twas really towards sunset that he died, and Rosa saw him in the morning.

"Poor Rosa was buried—the day before Miss Emily's wedding 'twas—and we heard nothing more for several months. Mother said to the parson, 'Don't tell Miss Emily, Sir, to sadden her and give her a shock just afore her wedding.' For Miss Emily had

a feeling heart, and we knew she'd think of Rosa, and drop a tear for her maybe, in the midst of all her pleasure. But I took the needlework to the Vicarage late one evening, and sent it in quietly without asking for the young ladies.

"'Man is made to mourn,' said Mother, 'but a wedding ain't the time to put folk in mind of that.'

"But though the parson did not tell Miss Emily, she found out about Rosa somehow, and down she came, with her eyes full of tears, for all she was going to be a happy bride so soon, to visit Mother in her trouble.

"She brought some choice flowers in her hand, white and purple fuchsias they were, and laid them on Rosa's heart; and it pleased poor Mother to see her show respect to the dead. Then she stood without speaking ever so long, Mother standing by and holding the sheet, which she'd turned back to let Miss Emily look at Rosa.

"I think Mother was glad that Miss Emily knew about it, after all, for Rosa had been fond of the young lady, and Mother thought she would have liked for her to come and look at her.

"At last Miss Emily clasped her hands together with a sob, and turned away.

"'And I am so happy,' she said to herself like, with the tears running down her cheek for pity of the other, that was just her own age, and lay dead before her, cut off in her youth, and her little babe beside her.

"But Mother laid her hand on Miss Emily's arm,

and made her look again at Rosa's white face, with the death-smile on her lips.

"'Ain't *she* happy?' said Mother, in a choked voice, as she put back the sheet. And she took Miss Emily down-stairs and told her all; about Rosa's dream, I mean, and her seeing Oliver; and not only that, but all sorts o' things about Rosa ever since she was a baby; for Miss Emily was a person folk liked to talk to when they was in trouble: she had a very understanding heart.

"I'll be bound Miss Emily give a sigh to poor Rosa's memory, when she put on her new underthings. Some folk might have been afraid to wear 'em, but I *know* they never brought Miss Emily no ill-luck. Who *should* know better nor I, that have been nurse to her dear children ever since my poor Horncastle died, and my lads went to sea?"

"But you haven't told us how you heard of Oliver Otway's death," we said, perceiving that Mrs. Horncastle had wandered from the main track of her story.

"I was just going to tell you," the worthy woman continued. "'Twas some months after Rosa's funeral, as I was sitting alone in the evening, I heard some one at the door in the dark, and there was Horncastle come home.

"'Ah, Mary, Mary, I bring thee bad news,' was his first words to me. 'Oliver's dead, my girl; poor Oliver's dead. I couldn't hardly bear come home,' he said, 'when I thought of having to tell Rosa.'

"'Tell me,' said I, without a word of Rosa's death, 'has he been dead long?'

"'Ever since last October,' says he.

"'And how did he die?' I asks, while my heart seemed to jump into my throat; 'how did he die?'

"Then Horncastle told me. 'There ain't no need for Rosa to know all,' says he; 'we must tell her he was drowned. He *did* fall overboard, my dear, but he was a good swimmer, and would have been picked up safe enough; but I may as well not deceive you, Mary; he didn't die by drowning, . . . a shark got him!'

"My dears, I was that shocked, it most took the breath out of my body.

"When I came to myself a bit, I told Horncastle all. But we was both awful struck to consider how things had worked together.

"'There's One above knows best,' said Horncastle; 'and for certain, Rosa was most too tender for this world.'

"I don't think he ever spoke a truer word. Whether 'twas trouble, or whether 'twas joy, Rosa was one of them that always feels things keener than most folk. When she was happy, it seemed as though life was Paradise to her; but when sorrow came a-nigh her, it just broke her heart. Poor maid; poor little Rosa! We've never ceased to miss her; but somehow I can't fancy her growing old, as she must ha' done if she'd lived. Ah well, well! She's more at home where she is gone to now, ain't she, than ever she'd have been in this world?"

WITHOUT A CHARACTER.

PART I.

"Oh, it was pitiful,
Near a whole city full,
Home she had none."

HOOD.

"AND so you see," said young Mrs. Wroce, "the thing I want is to meet with a nice servant immediately."

Young Mrs. Wroce was only three-and-twenty, grey-eyed and dark-haired, and unquestionably pretty, although the paleness of her complexion was rather sallow, and there was something a little sleepy in the slow, languid grace of all her movements. Those were days in which leaning back in one's seat was much less practised than it is at present, and young people, unless invalids, were not often accommodated with arm-chairs. The chair on which Mrs. Wroce was sitting was straight-backed and cane-bottomed, and was provided with a hard drab-coloured cushion; but instead of sitting perfectly upright, and as near the edge as possible, as good Miss Armstrong and her sister had perseveringly endeavoured to get her into the habit of doing, during

the nine years she had spent under their care, Mrs. Wroce leaned back in the most comfortable attitude that the construction of her seat would admit of; and when, as she spoke the words recorded above, her manner acquired the slightest possible shade of eagerness, although her voice did not alter from its usual rather drawling tone, she merely raised herself a little, into an easy, lounging position, resting one arm upon the table, as though some kind of support was positively necessary to her.

It was quite distressing to poor Miss Armstrong to look at her. Every now and then she glanced at her sister in a way that was intended to hint volumes of disapproval; and it was really as much as she could do to refrain from remonstrating with her former pupil, who was quite unconscious how much her demeanour was fidgeting and annoying her old schoolmistress. But Miss Armstrong was a woman who was always sure to end by finding some excuse for the imperfections of those she loved; so she soon began to say in her kind heart that she must not be too hard on poor Eleanor Wroce, who had been born in India, and had returned thither, and married an officer in the Indian army, when she was still little more than a child. "Not quite seventeen, indeed," reflected Miss Armstrong, "Well, well, that dreadful climate is enough to account for anything;" and with a little sigh of mingled forbearance and regret, she brought her undivided attention to bear on the subject before her—viz. young Mrs. Wroce's pressing need of a good servant.

"You know," Mrs. Wroce continued, "my ayah is to return to India with the Spencer Cliftons, and they want her to come to them at once. So what am I to do? I must have somebody to take her place. What should I do without a servant, even for a single day? I never did a thing for Baby in my life; I don't believe I could even undress him and put him to bed."

At this confession of helplessness Miss Susan Armstrong laughed a little; but Miss Armstrong said, "Of course, my dear, of course," with great seriousness, and both sisters assured their young visitor that she might rely on their doing their best to assist her, though, they added, it was not easy to meet with a really satisfactory person at such very short notice. "However, we must try," concluded Miss Armstrong cheerfully; and Mrs. Wroce thanked her very sincerely in her gentle, courteous way, but without really having much perception of the trouble her kind old friends were undertaking on her behalf. Always accustomed to have everything done for her, she had not the slightest idea of the difficulty and fatigue which often attend the making of those minor arrangements on which much of the comfort of life depends.

But the Miss Armstrongs did not grudge their trouble. The elder of the two sisters spent a whole day in making inquiries, and visiting registry offices; until at last, after an infinity of pains, she met with "the very person required," as she told her sister triumphantly. This was a staid and rather grave-looking woman, of about forty years of age, long

accustomed to service, and with perfectly unexceptionable references.

"I called upon the sister of the lady she had lived with last, myself," said Miss Armstrong, "and she tells me this Sarah Watts is a treasure, a perfect treasure! Nothing could be more fortunate for our dear, inexperienced Eleanor. I have desired her to call at the W—— Hotel at eleven to-morrow morning, and I have written to Eleanor to prepare her for seeing her. Perhaps it was hardly necessary, as everything is so satisfactory, and dear Eleanor relies so entirely upon us; but still I thought I would rather she saw the servant herself before definitely engaging her."

Poor Miss Armstrong! Vexation and disappointment were in store for her. At the appointed time on the following morning the "treasure" waited upon Mrs. Wroce: and not much more than an hour later she presented herself before Miss Armstrong in a state of half-suppressed resentment and indignation, with the information that Mrs. Wroce had told her she did not think she would suit her! Miss Armstrong's annoyance was unbounded. What could be the meaning of it? She all but begged the woman's pardon, made sure there must be some mistake, and entreated her to hold herself disengaged until she heard from her again. But Sarah Watts was very decided. No, she said, the lady did not want her, she was sure; and now she came to think of it, she believed she should not like the place herself; and, dropping a respectable, old-fashioned curtsey,

she departed, leaving both the Miss Armstrongs in a state of great perplexity and mortification.

A note received from Mrs. Wroce, a little later in the day, was not exactly calculated to soothe their irritation. "Dear Miss Armstrong," wrote the spoilt young wife, with the most complete want of perception of the state of mind in which her old friend was likely to be, "I have seen the person you were kind enough to send, but, you know, she is too old. She looks so prim and formal, she quite frightened me. I know I should never have the courage to order her about, and I should have to let her do exactly as she liked, with me and Baby too. So I told her she would not suit me, and I shall be so very much obliged if you will send me somebody younger, for I am sure I should like that better. Love to Miss Susan, and thank you a thousand times for all your kindness to your affectionate old pupil—ELEANOR WROCE."

It would be hiding the truth not to allow that the Miss Armstrongs were very angry. Miss Susan, in especial, resented the fruitless labour so coolly imposed on her sister. "Well, really, I never heard such a thing in my life. Does she imagine you keep a supply of servants in your pocket?" she asked, with an angry chuckle at her own joke. "I hope you will leave her to find her own domestics in future!"

"It is rather too bad," said Miss Armstrong. But her indignation was largely tempered with pity. "Poor, foolish, inexperienced young thing!" she exclaimed: "it *is* provoking, Susan, certainly; but do

you know, I feel for her, I really do! There's her mother thousands of miles away, and she as helpless, as unfit to manage for herself as—— Well, well, Susan, we must not be angry with her. I don't believe she has another creature in London that she can look to except ourselves."

Miss Susan was soon pacified. She only stipulated that her sister should not again fatigue herself as she had done the day before. It was now her turn, she said; and although she could not hope a second time to be so fortunate as to meet with any one so suitable as Sarah Watts, yet she would do her best. "But, sister, you must write to Eleanor," she added, "and engage her to come here, and make her listen to a little good sense."

To this Miss Armstrong agreed. She sat down to write; and Miss Susan, conquering the last remains of her irritation, put on her bonnet, and set out to walk to a distant registry-office. As she had foretold, she was not so successful as her sister. She met with no one whom she considered in the least likely to suit, and she was in the very act of relating, over the tea-table, the details of her quest, and lamenting its want of result, when, once more, a note arrived from Mrs. Wroce, full of apologies for having given the trouble gently hinted at by Miss Armstrong in the one she had just received from her, promising an early visit on the morrow, and announcing rather shortly, that she was happy to tell them she had met with a servant whose appearance she liked very much, and she had engaged her. The Miss Armstrongs looked at

one another much surprised. They "only hoped poor dear Eleanor had not made some dreadful mistake."

What "poor dear Eleanor" had really done was this.

She was reclining on the uncomfortable horsehair sofa of her sitting-room at W—— Hotel, sometimes laughing a little over her late summary dismissal of the grimly-respectable Sarah Watts, sometimes amusing herself with watching her ayah, who was standing in a sunny window, murmuring soft nonsense to the baby in her own Eastern tongue, and looking, with her foreign complexion and picturesque dress, strangely incongruous with the angular stiffness of the apartment, with its dingy carpet and curtains, and heavy, inconvenient chairs and tables, when a servant knocked at the door, and announced that a young person wanted to speak to Mrs. Wroce.

"A servant? Oh, I hope it is!" exclaimed Mrs. Wroce, who was a little too apt to be confidential to anybody who happened to be at hand. "Show her up directly."

Accordingly in a few minutes the door opened once more, and a quiet, gentle-looking girl of one- or two-and-twenty was shown into the room. She looked thin and delicate, and the exertion of walking up stairs had brought a bright pink flush to her cheek; whilst her dress, which was almost Quaker-like in its quaint simplicity, was worn and threadbare.

She curtsied and coloured deeply on entering, and seeing that Mrs. Wroce waited for her to speak, began in a low, hesitating voice, which, however, trembled with an eagerness she was unable to conceal.

"If you please, ma'am, I lodge with the chambermaid's sister, and she told me that you wanted a servant, and I thought, ma'am, perhaps I might suit."

Mrs. Wroce looked attentively at her. "I like her looks," she said to herself, "and I'm sure her dress is quiet enough to please even Miss Armstrong."

"Yes," she replied aloud; "I do want a servant. I want somebody to take care of my baby, and wait upon me; do you think you could do that? What was your last situation?"

"I was a lady's-maid, ma'am," said the girl, "but indeed I am very fond of children. I had the care of a baby for several months once, when the regular nurse was ill. And I can make dresses, and dress hair. Oh, indeed, I would do my very best to please you!" The tears stood in the girl's eyes, and she bit her lip to keep from crying. Her face wore a look of intense anxiety as she waited for Mrs. Wroce's reply.

"I don't see why you should not do very well," said Mrs. Wroce; and then she paused, and began to wonder what she ought to say next. "I suppose you could come at once, couldn't you? To-morrow, I mean, or the next day, because you know I want to go down into the country, to Wroceston in X-shire, as soon as possible. And I hope you don't dislike a quiet place, for they tell me Wroceston is a very quiet place."

"Oh, ma'am, I should be thankful to leave London, and I can come whenever you like," said the girl earnestly, and still with the same expectant, anxious look.

She was waiting for something that she knew must come, and in another moment it came.

"To-morrow I should want you, if possible," slowly continued Mrs. Wroce; "but—oh, yes, to be sure, how stupid I am! I knew there was something—you must tell me where to write for your character, or could I go and see anybody, which would be a quicker way? By-the-bye, you have not told me your name yet."

The girl clasped her hands together, and turned very pale. "My name is Lydia Bennett," she answered hurriedly, and then paused, advanced closer than she had yet been to Mrs. Wroce's sofa, made two ineffectual attempts to speak, and, suddenly hiding her face in her handkerchief, burst into tears.

Mrs. Wroce sat bolt upright in her amazement, and the ayah turned round curiously at the sound of stifled sobs. "Don't cry like that," said Mrs. Wroce kindly, for when once roused she did not want for a heart, "and do sit down. Don't be afraid to tell me what your trouble is."

She rose and laid her hand on the girl's shoulder, and gently forced her to be seated. "How you tremble!" she observed; "let me send for a glass of wine."

But Lydia Bennett removed her handkerchief from her flushed and tear-stained face.

"No, no," she cried, "oh, please don't, ma'am; I never tasted wine in all my life! But I beg your pardon for behaving so foolishly. I oughtn't to have come. I know it's no use—and yet I couldn't help trying; but I never thought I should behave like

this; only when it came over me what you'd say when I told that I *have no character*, I felt so hurt that—that——" She struggled for composure, and added more quietly, "'Tis since I've got so weak I can't stop myself crying sometimes."

Mrs. Wroce took the girl's hand in hers and noticed the thinness of her wrist and arm. "My poor girl, have you not been ill?" she asked tenderly.

The kind voice went to Lydia Bennett's heart. "Oh no, ma'am," she answered sadly; "I'm a strong girl in general, for all I'm so fallen away. It isn't illness that's done it, 'tis *hunger!*"

Mrs. Wroce was horrified. "Let me send for something to eat directly," she exclaimed. With unusual quickness she crossed the room to ring the bell, with such energy as quite to startle the man-servant she had brought with her from India; and when he hurriedly obeyed the summons, "Davis," she said, "I want some luncheon directly, a basin of hot soup if possible, but whatever it is bring it up at once. Mind, I can't wait."

Then returning to Lydia Bennett's side, she coaxed her with winning gentleness to speak with unreserve, and tell her her whole story.

"Tell me how it is you have no character," she pleaded. "I don't think you can have done anything very wrong."

The girl started up. "I've done nothing! nothing!" she exclaimed. "Oh, ma'am, if anybody would but believe my own words!—I've nobody to speak for me—but indeed, indeed I say nothing but what's true."

She glanced wistfully into Mrs. Wroce's face. "I'll tell you all about it, ma'am," she added.

"I come of respectable folk," she began; "Father was a milkman, and a good, religious man he was, ma'am, and brought me up to know what was right, and to do it too—and he paid to have me taught dressmaking and hairdressing—and if he and Mother were alive now, I should have some person to take my part, but they're both gone to a better place years ago, and I hope they don't know what I've had to go through, I'm sure, because 'twould grieve them, even in heaven, I think. Well, ma'am, my first situation was pretty comfortable, but I didn't stay there many months, because the gentleman died, and the family went abroad, but they gave me a good character, and I soon got placed again. The wages were high, and I thought myself a lucky girl, but I never guessed what would be the end of it. I stopped there two years, ma'am, but it was not comfortable. They were continually changing houses; my wages were not paid regularly, and the tradesmen were always a-calling to get their bills settled, but whenever I spoke of leaving, my mistress used to beg of me to stop, with tears in her eyes, and I liked her, and so I stopped. But I never could have thought she'd have acted by me as she has done—never."

"What did she do?" asked Mrs. Wroce, greatly interested.

"Well, ma'am," Lydia continued, "I don't know what it was they did exactly, for I never could make it out. Some folks said it was forgery; but both my

master and mistress got into trouble, and one morning they went out in a hired carriage and never came back. And they hadn't been gone many hours before the police came and searched the house, and oh, what a piece of work there was! Everything was sold to pay their debts, but I don't know what became of the money. I never saw a halfpenny of it, though there was a twelvemonth's wages owing to me. And I and the other servants were turned adrift! I don't know how *they* managed. But, ma'am, you may believe it, I've never had a chance of getting into another situation since."

"But why not?" asked Mrs. Wroce.

"No one will take me without a character," Lydia replied, quietly and sadly. "Oh, ma'am, I say nothing about the wages, but she needn't have robbed me of my bread! and that's what it come to. They went off, and nobody knows where they went to. People do say they must have gone beyond seas and taken another name. But oh, it did seem very cruel, that my mistress shouldn't have written a line even that I could show to get me into another situation. But she was full of trouble herself; and I suppose she forgot it."

"But what did you do, Lydia?" asked Mrs. Wroce.

"Well, ma'am, that's six months ago, and nobody knows what I've suffered: nobody knows how hard I've tried to get an honest living ever since. I should think, at first, I must have called on more than fifty ladies. But it was all over whenever I came to say I'd no character. Nobody would even take me a

month on trial. Then I took in needlework; but there are too many who do that; and, you know, ma'am, it's badly paid. But I think nobody's had such ill-luck as me. For six weeks I haven't been able to get anything to do; and the people where I lodge are almost tired of me. I've had to sell most of my clothes to pay them, and I expect they'll turn me into the street soon. Then yesterday I heard them talking of you, ma'am, and saying how you wanted a servant: and though I was sure it was no use, I was in such despair I thought I *must* come an' try. I know it is no use. I know you *can't* take me, ma'am, though you are so kind, without a character. Oh, I've tried to trust in God, but I do think He's quite forgotten me!"

And Lydia, hiding her face in her hands, burst into a passion of tears.

"Never say that," said Mrs. Wroce, in a grave, gentle voice. "Listen to me, Lydia Bennett; if you like to enter my service, you shall do so this very day."

Lydia raised her face and looked incredulously at the lady. "Without a character!" she murmured in a doubtful voice.

"I am satisfied with your own account of yourself," answered Mrs. Wroce; "I will take your own word as to your qualifications, and——"

Lydia interrupted her. With a wild, passionate cry of thankfulness she seized her hand and carried it to her lips. Half choked with emotion, she strove in broken words to express her gratitude; then crim-

soned with shame at her own demonstrativeness, and stood up, suddenly silent and awkward, as the door opened, and Davis the man-servant entered bearing a tray.

Mrs. Wroce had dismissed the ayah some time before, and the instant Davis had left the room she uncovered the savoury basin of soup with her own hands, and began to press Lydia Bennett to eat.

It was months since Lydia had partaken of a really sufficient meal. She had been rather existing than living, striving to keep body and soul together on the smallest modicum of nourishment. The mere sight of food made her almost wild with hunger, for that day, in particular, she had, up to that hour, eaten nothing. Yet it discomposed her sadly to be thus commanded to sit down and eat with Mrs. Wroce looking on. It seemed to her such a shocking reversal of all the proprieties of life. She stammered out confused thanks and apologies, and protestations that she "really couldn't."

But young Mrs. Wroce had seen the look of hunger in her eyes, and could not rest until she had seen her eat.

"You must," she said, pettishly; "it is the first thing I tell you to do."

And, half choked with bashfulness, Lydia found herself obliged to be ruled by her young mistress, who stood over her and sternly compelled her to finish the soup to the very last spoonful.

"And now you can ring," said Mrs. Wroce, relapsing after the matter was settled into the languid

Anglo-Indian, "and then Davis will come and take away the tray. And, look here, Lydia, of course if you have sold your clothes you will want some more, so I will give you two sovereigns——"

"Will you *advance* it to me out of my wages, please, ma'am?" interrupted Lydia quietly.

"Well, perhaps I had better," continued Mrs. Wroce, "and, Lydia, come as early as you can to-morrow evening, and be prepared for a journey the next day. Do be early, for I shall want you to pack, you know."

"If all the Miss Armstrongs in the world were to say Don't," she added to herself, after Lydia was gone, "I'd do it all the same! Poor dear girl, how she has suffered! I'm very glad I have engaged her, but—what *will* Miss Armstrong say?"

Meanwhile, who can describe the tumult of delight in which Lydia Bennett went on her way, not homewards—the poor child had no home—but back to the wretched lodging which was her temporary shelter? She had not exaggerated her troubles; the last few months had indeed been very dark and bitter to her. Only those who know what it is to stand friendless in a great city can guess what the girl had gone through, —what hair-breadth escapes from starvation; what wild temptations suggested by despair; what cruel disappointments!

And Lydia had been trained up in the ways of God by strict though loving parents. Dearly as they loved her, they had been very stern in teaching her young feet to tread in the path of truth and honesty; and Lydia in all her troubles had been true to their

teaching. In the midst of snares, of which God keep us all from ever knowing the subtlety and strength, she had kept herself pure and honest. Through all that terrible ordeal of friendless privation she had not done a single thing to be ashamed of. Only, now and then, when all looked very dark, she used to shut her eyes and shudder at the Future, and wish that she were dead. Now and then, even, the thought crossed her, should she have the courage to put an end to her own existence if life should ever become quite too hard to bear?

Now, as she hastened through the crowded streets, she remembered this, and silently asked forgiveness for having been so wicked, so faithless. Portions of the old hymns and verses which her dear father had loved to repeat kept coming into her mind, and giving expression, as it were, to the overflowing thankfulness that possessed her. She could scarcely believe that only that morning she had awakened to heaviness of heart and despair. Now it was as if the gates of an earthly paradise of plenty and security had been unexpectedly thrown open to her. How her heart glowed toward the lady who had shown her such generous trust!

"I could lay down my life for her," murmured Lydia to herself.

The sense of relief from a long-endured burden was almost oppressive; but her gratitude could not stop short at Mrs. Wroce—it flowed onwards, onwards; until at last fear was allayed and excitement soothed at the feet of that Almighty Friend whose love and

providence she had been too often tempted to doubt and distrust. "But," said Lydia to herself, "I never will again. Let what will happen I'll remember this lesson—'Though He slay me, yet will I trust Him.' That's what Father used to say when Mother died and he lost his health, and we became so poor. I take shame to myself that I forgot Father's example. But I never will again. Let what will happen," she repeated, "please God, I'll never be so faithless again as to think the Lord's forgotten me."

When Mrs. Wroce, calling the next day on the good Miss Armstrongs, was forced to admit to them that she had taken into her service a girl without a character, they shook their heads in a most disapproving manner, and became quite emphatic in their remonstrances. And Mrs. Wroce was very provoking. She did not appeal to their kind hearts by an account of Lydia's story—perhaps she was afraid that they would vex her by being incredulous; instead of this, she enumerated the leading facts with an air of languid caprice, and left it to be supposed that she had been actuated by no better motives than mere whim and fancy. It required all Miss Armstrong's forbearance not to be very angry with her. However, finding remonstrance useless, she contented herself with exhorting Eleanor not to neglect to look well after her new servant. "For your child's sake, my dear," she added.

Mrs. Wroce shook her head. "I don't think I have it in me to look after anybody much," said she; "but you don't know how nice Lydia is, *really*—I shall call her Lydia, you know; I couldn't think of calling her such

an ugly name as Bennett. And, you know, I never *should* have liked that Sarah Watts, though I'm ever so much obliged to you for seeing after her, and it *is* important that one should like one's servants, isn't it?"

Miss Armstrong and Miss Susan agreed afterwards, with many sighs, that poor dear Eleanor Wroce was sillier than ever; and yet, silly as she was, there was something about her that nobody could help loving her for. Both sisters kissed her most affectionately and forgivingly when she rose to take leave of them, and entreated her to write to them.

The next day young Mrs. Wroce left London, and travelled down into X-shire in a post-chaise, according to the fashion of the day, accompanied by her child, an infant of a few months old, her maid Lydia Bennett, and her man-servant James Davis.

PART II.

"Sometimes walking, not unseen,
By hedgerow elms, on hillocks green,
Straight mine eye hath caught new pleasures,
As the landscape round it measures;
Russet lawns and fallows gray,
Where the nibbling flocks do stray;
Meadows trim with daisies pied,
Shallow brooks and rivers wide,
Towers and battlements it sees,
Bosomed high in tufted trees."

L'Allegro.

Many years ago, before the days of railroads and the penny post, of electric telegraphs and national schools,

the village of Wroceston, lying a couple of miles off the high road, almost hidden in the bosom of the X-shire hills, was one of the most retired and unprogressive villages in the whole county. Indeed, it is still considered a quaint, primitive little place, though it is much altered since those days. At the time that I am speaking of every cottage in the village was thatched; the church was washed yellow outside and blockaded with pews of every odd variety of shape and size within, except where a certain number of the ancient oaken benches were left for the use of the poor; the music of a fiddle and two flutes was to be heard in the choir every Sunday morning; and the rising generation—those few of them, that is, who went to school at all—were instructed by a venerable dame, past all other work, who considered the arts of writing and summing as superfluous accomplishments; it was quite enough for "poor folks' children" if they were taught to read their Bibles.

Now there is a capital school in Wroceston, where all the children are taught excellently well by a certificated mistress; the church has been restored, almost rebuilt; the flutes and the fiddle have been abolished in favour of a harmonium; and there are but two thatched houses left in the parish. For the present Squire of Wroceston is an ardent improver, and is incessantly carrying out some new device towards making the place a model village. But his grandfather, Sir Nathanael Wroce, was a man by nature and education, and also by the habit of a lifetime, intensely averse to change. With the lands of his

ancestors he seemed to have inherited also their ways and fashions, and even in some instances their personal peculiarities. Whatever had the merit of being old, he accepted with respect and affection; whatever possessed the defect of being new, he received with suspicion and dislike. The only reforms he would ever hear of, even in matters of detail, were such as could be proved to be based on the principle of trying to bring back, as far as possible, the "good old times" of his forefathers; the only dangers, either to national or local prosperity, that he would ever really believe in, were such as were likely to arise from the triumph of novelty and the possible success of new-fangled ideas. To one or the other of these two causes he used to refer almost everything that went amiss, and in particular the follies and misdeeds of his elder brother and immediate predecessor, who, instead of residing on his paternal acres and "doing his duty by the estate," in which, Sir Nathanael thought, the first obligation of a Wroce of Wroceston consisted, had lived a wild life in London, and wasted not merely his own, but the family substance, in riotous living. Although his life was not a very long one—for he died before reaching middle age—he contrived to leave the Wroceston estate in such an encumbered condition that Sir Nathanael found himself a poor man all his life, additionally embarrassed with the reputation of being rich.

It is hardly possible for a man holding such a position to avoid the reproach of parsimony, and poor Sir Nathanael was condemned for being a "stingy old

miser," by many who were not at all inclined to quarrel with him for being what the people of the neighbouring town of Arleigh called a "bigoted old Tory." They ought rather to have pitied than condemned him; but public gossip is seldom just. It was the greatest possible mortification to him to be unable, through want of money, to take what he considered to be his proper place in the county; it was to him a painful duty to abstain from all unnecessary expense, a duty so painful that it required no less a motive to support him in it than the hope of freeing the family estate from its present embarrassments, and transmitting it unencumbered to his son.

Partly from pride, partly from poverty, he shut himself up with his wife and children at Wroceston Hall, and there led the most retired life possible, holding very little intercourse with his neighbours, except in a stately and formal manner, and at long intervals, with a few of the oldest families in the county, who were the hereditary friends of his house. By degrees the rigid economy he had imposed upon himself became natural to him, and he continued it from habit, long after most of the mortgages were paid off and all real need for it was over. Besides this, the narrow circle in which he lived offered no check to his various little peculiarities of thought and temper, and he became so confirmed in them that they came to be considered as much a part of himself as his very look and voice. But, as he grew old, partly from the tendency of the rural mind to cling with fondness to whatever has become thoroughly

familiar to it, partly because the old Baronet did really possess many excellences, he acquired a certain position in the respect and affection of the neighbourhood, which was equally gratifying to his heart and soothing to his pride. Many acts of real generosity in great things disposed people to regard as a pardonable weakness his petty economy in little matters; rumours crept out of all he had done for the family estate, and appealed to the sympathy and respect of his brother Squires; he was uniformly kind to his dependants, and just and forbearing to his tenantry—the last being a rare virtue in a needy man: so that, in fact, when people were disposed to speak well of him, there was no difficulty in finding something to say.

At the time that my story begins, Sir Nathanael and Lady Wroce were living alone together at Wroceston Hall. They were both somewhat advanced in life, Sir Nathanael being past seventy years of age, and his wife only a few years younger; and of their three daughters, one was dead, and the other two had long been married; whilst their only son, Colonel Wroce, was far away in India.

It was rather a forlorn, monotonous existence for the two old people. The married home of Caroline, the favourite daughter, was in such a distant county that her parents only saw her at intervals of several years. The other sister, it is true, was nearer at hand, having married the Rector of Arleigh; but her husband was in infirm health, so that she was seldom able to leave home for many hours at a time, even to

visit her father and mother. And the son, another Nathanael Wroce, of course, had only been at home once, for a few months, in the course of fifteen years. The truth was, that home had never been a particularly happy home to the brother and sisters. Their mother, indeed, was most loving-hearted and affectionate, but unluckily not very wise, and too completely her husband's shadow to show much sympathy with her children's grievances; and their father with a disposition to be despotic in trifles combined an unhappy reserve, which withheld from his children, as they began to grow up, the true reason of the vexatious restrictions and economies which he imposed upon them. The consequence was a perpetual atmosphere of worry and fret, and of small, constantly-recurring irritations.

If there had only been the girls, who had been educated at home and very seldom went elsewhere, they might have been tolerably submissive; but it was far otherwise with the young Nathanael. He was naturally rather impatient of control, and after he had been sent to Eton, and had learnt to know a little of the world beyond his native village, his annoyance at the petty restraints to which he was subjected at home became more and more confirmed. He chafed at what he thought mean and sordid in Sir Nathanael's mode of life; he complained loudly of the extreme smallness of his allowance of pocket-money; in fact, he began to "get on," as it is called, very badly indeed with his father.

Matters were brought to a crisis when he left Eton

at the age of nineteen. He was in debt—not very deeply, it is true, but enough to enrage and alarm Sir Nathanael, who, in his anger, gave vent to bitter prophecies, that the young man intended to tread in the steps of his uncle Godfrey, and undo all he had done for the estate; and then young Nathanael, hot and indignant, and determined in some way or other to achieve independence of his father, and to get away from the irritations of home, accepted an offer, made through an influential friend, of a commission in the Indian Army, and went out to Bengal in the autumn of the same year. Before he sailed, however, he had made his mother explain to him the full meaning of his father's allusion to his uncle, Sir Godfrey Wroce; and that explanation filled him with a generous compunction for his own conduct, and a new appreciation of, and respect for, his father. Honestly and manfully he went to him and asked his pardon; and Sir Nathanael, touched and softened, for the first time treated his son with real confidence, and entrusted to him the history of some of the secret hopes and cares that had been the true source of much domestic worry and discomfort.

From this day forward the father and son learnt mutually to esteem and value each other. When, in India, young Nathanael found rapid promotion and honourable employment, the father's proud delight was unbounded, and he began to own that his son was worthy indeed to be a Wroce of Wroceston. On the other hand, the love of home and family increased and deepened in the son's heart when far away from

both. Distance threw a veil over all that had been painful and vexatious; in his affectionate remembrance, every characteristic touch was held sacred, and the man smiled often at the memory of the very things which had driven the boy wild with irritation. When, however, after several years, he returned home for a short time on leave, he did not find that life at Wroceston had, in reality, become much more congenial to him. His father stood rather in awe of him, and was excessively anxious to make things pleasant to him, and he was himself resolved to avoid doing, or even saying, whatever could possibly vex Sir Nathanael; but all this mutual forbearance could only avert differences—it could not produce cordiality. They parted very good friends; but after he was gone, Sir Nathanael shook his head, and told his wife he feared "Nathanael picked up some very new-fangled notions in India;" whilst Colonel, then Major, Wroce, speeding Eastwards, heaved a sigh of relief at escaping from the narrowness of home, and thanked Heaven for the wider sphere in which he had found a place. There was one point on which he and his father had several times been very near a quarrel, and this was his persistent refusal to think of marrying. Poor Sir Nathanael several times represented to him that it was really his duty to do so, in order that the family might be carried on.

"Only think if Wroceston should pass away into another name," he would say piteously.

But in this matter the son would neither submit to dictation nor listen to advice. Early in life he had

met with a disappointment in love, which had made him cynical and contemptuous towards the whole female sex, and so thoroughly indisposed him for matrimony, that, by the time he was forty, all looked upon him as a confirmed old bachelor. Great, then, was his father's delight when, after he had almost given up all hope of such an event, he unexpectedly received the news of his son's intended marriage with a Miss Eleanor Stevens, the daughter of a brother officer. Notwithstanding a great disparity in years —the Colonel was more than twenty years older than his bride—the union was a very happy one; and when, after a year or two of childless wedlock, a son was born to them, their joy and the joy of the old people at Wroceston was very great. But, alas! it was soon overclouded. The child died before it was a twelvemonth old, and so did two other children that were born afterwards. The Indian climate seemed to be inexorably fatal to Colonel Wroce's infants. When the third child died, the mother, almost broken-hearted, also began to droop. The Colonel was seized with a terror of losing all his treasures; and although his wife desired to run all risks for herself rather than be separated from him, yet, being again likely to become a mother, she listened to her husband's urgent representations, and acquiesced in his writing to his father to announce that he intended to send her home to England as soon as her baby was born, and she herself sufficiently recovered to bear the journey, and asking a home for her at Wroceston Hall. This letter was crossed on the way by one from Sir Nathanael,

imploring his son to make the very arrangement proposed, and Colonel Wroce did not consider it necessary to wait for any further correspondence. Once more Mrs. Wroce brought a son into the world, a fine, healthy-looking child—as indeed all her former infants had been—and he delayed not an hour longer than was absolutely necessary to take his wife and child to Calcutta, and see them on board a steamer bound for England.

Nevertheless, Sir Nathanael, unaccustomed to such promptitude, was surprised, and taken unprepared, when he received a letter from his daughter-in-law, informing him that she was in England, and about to leave London for Wroceston, stopping on the way at Bristol, at the house of distant relations of her own, where she should remain until she heard from Sir Nathanael on what day it would be most convenient to receive her at Wroceston.

Her letter threw poor Sir Nathanael into a state of most unnecessary excitement and perplexity, for his life had been of late years so monotonous, that an incident like this seemed to him a tremendous event. In was in vain for his wife to soothe him, and declare that everything should be ready for Eleanor and her boy, however soon they might arrive. The old man insisted on himself making a progress through all the rooms in the house, and tried Lady Wroce's patience sadly by his fidgety interference and perpetual suggestions of tiresome changes. At last the idea occurred to him that it would not be showing proper respect to his son's wife to allow her to arrive in a postchaise;

he must send the family chariot to Bristol to fetch her. This idea delivered Lady Wroce from his presence for a time, whilst he hurried down to the book-room, which, although no great reader, he habitually made his private sitting-room, and desired the butler to let Young George know that he wanted to speak to him immediately.

Young George was about forty years of age. But ever since the day that he was hired as a boy to help his father, Old George—now long since superannuated by age and rheumatism, and pensioned off—he had been so called to distinguish him. In his primary vocation he was the coachman; but he was a great deal more besides. Young George was a man of whom it was emphatically said that he "had a head upon his shoulders." In these days of examinations he might perhaps be called an ignorant person, for he read with difficulty, and when he wrote, his spelling was phonetic and irregular in the highest degree; but his practical intelligence was immense. Few could beat him in his own department—a thorough knowledge of all that concerns a country life. He was a far cleverer man than his master, and on all subjects within his ken took a wider view than Sir Nathanael, whose right hand and prime minister he was in all things, whether in stable or kennel, garden or farm. At the moment the Baronet sent for him, he was the head of a line of mowers who were cutting the long grass in the Home Field; for it was a lovely day in June, and Hay Harvest had just begun.

Therefore, when Sir Nathanael accosted him with

an inquiry whether he thought the horses could go to Bristol that day, he looked at his master in amazement, and glanced significantly out of window. It was almost like a law of the Medes and Persians at Wroceston that the carriage should never be used during Hay Harvest.

"Well, Sir Nathanael," he replied, "Bristol's a long way for our horses, Bristol is, at any time, as you do know so well as I. An' it 'ould be almost a sin to go to-day, your honour, when the scythes be in the grass, an' the Lord have sent *such* weather, an' the grass be that ripe it might ha' been cut a week agone—an' we short-handed."

"Ay, ay," said Sir Nathanael, "I know all that. But just see here, George. I've had a letter this morning from the Colonel's wife to say she's in England, and by my reckoning she must be at Bristol since yesterday. Now the chariot ought to be sent to fetch her. I wouldn't for the world have the Colonel say we let her come on here in a post-chaise."

"What, your honour!" cried George. "Be Mrs. Wroce come? Oh, what a fool I be! That were what Simon were tellin' of, then. An' I put him down, an' told him he didn' know nothin' about it. I knowed you was expectin' of her, your honour, but never so soon! I do give 'ee joy wi' all my heart!"

Young George's outspoken joy quite overcame Sir Nathanael. His voice trembled as he replied:

"Yes, George, my daughter-in-law is come, and—and—my grandson. Yes, there's another boy, a

healthy child. May God in His goodness spare him to us! Oh, George, the thought of having him at Wroceston is almost too much for me—it is indeed!" And two tears trickled slowly down the old man's cheek.

George fairly broke down. "What's *hay* alongside o' this?" he said with a sob of delight; for loyalty to the family he served was a strong part of his character, and of all the Wroces none had ever been so dear to him as the bright Eton lad, "always up to his jokes," who had been the hero and idol of his own boyhood. "Ain't this a joyful day for Wroceston, then! There'll be ringin' o' bells, I reckon, to-morrow, when I do bring 'em home, for all folk is so busy wi' the hay. Ay, ay, your honour, don't you trouble about the horses. I warrant *they* can go. It 'ould be poor work havin' 'em at all, if they couldn' go to Bristol to fetch your honour's own granson."

And so it came to pass that the same evening Mrs. Wroce received a note from her father-in-law, welcoming her arrival, and telling her that he had sent the carriage to bring her to Wroceston the next day. An eager, affectionate epistle from Lady Wroce accompanied this formal communication, and both were delivered by Young George himself, who was immensely gratified when Mrs. Wroce shook hands with him, and told him she had heard of him from her husband.

He looked long and fondly at the baby, which Mrs. Wroce called Lydia to show him, and even with some little attention at that young woman herself, but only

that he might form some opinion whether she was worthy to be the nurse of such a precious morsel of humanity; for Young George, though a bachelor, was seldom in the habit of taking much notice of women, whether old or young. Like Colonel Wroce, his master's son, he had been disappointed in early life. He had been cruelly jilted by a village coquette, when he was still little more than a boy, and since then had never cared to expose himself to the chance of being jilted by anybody else. He had lived to see his old love lose all her beauty, and develop into the haggard, scolding, untidy mother of a tribe of unruly children. And he never saw her without feeling thankful for his escape, and strengthened in his resolution to avoid the dangers and disagreeables of matrimony. This resolution he met with very little temptation to break. All the women-servants of the Hall, where he was lodged and boarded, were older than himself, with the single exception of one under-servant, who was a remarkably heavy and unattractive girl; at the cottage of his aged father and mother, where he spent his Sunday afternoons, he never, by any chance, met any woman below fifty, and with time and thoughts thoroughly occupied with a great variety of work, and much responsibility, he neither missed, nor sought for, a wife and home of his own.

It was a long day's journey from Bristol to Wroceston, and, although they started early, it was not till towards evening that the carriage entered the village. Mrs. Wroce was very tired, and the baby

extremely fractious; and when, according to George's prophecy, the bells struck up a tumultuous peal, the thought of her absent husband, her lost darlings, the unknown home she was about to enter alone, as a stranger, when to visit it with her husband had been the favourite anticipation of her married life—all smote together upon her heart and she burst into tears.

Lydia was so entirely occupied in attending to her mistress's condition, and pacifying the infant, that she scarcely noticed the beauty of the long avenue into which the carriage turned, and the stately appearance of the great red-brick mansion before which it stopped. It was not till the next morning that she began at all to realize where she was; and then when she drew up her blind, and found herself looking out of a bower of Banksia roses on an old-fashioned but well-kept garden, terminating in a ha-ha, so that it seemed to her inexperienced eye to melt imperceptibly into the fields beyond, bordered with fine old elm-trees, her heart beat quick with admiration, and she felt as though she were one of the Chosen People who had been brought up out of Egypt and conveyed into the Promised Land in the space of a single week.

The girl had never been out of London before, and the commonest country sights and sounds filled her with wondering delight. Mrs. Wroce said it was as good as a play to hear her talk. Of course she had seen grass and trees before, and grass and trees as beautiful as any in England, in the Parks; but it was the freedom, the abundance of the country, that over-

powered her. The rippling brown water which skirted one side of the home-field with its border of marigold and fern; the hawthorn that was just beginning to wane; the wild roses opening into bloom; the blue hyacinths and ragged-robin in the hedgerow; the fragrant heaps of new-mown hay—all these things filled her with such ecstasy as she had never known before in her life.

Hay Harvest was a sort of out-of-door festival at Wroceston Hall. There were no machines in those days, and every available hand was released from household work to help in the hay-field. Lydia was not at first asked for her assistance, as she was considered to have enough to do in waiting on her lady, and taking care of "the young master," as everybody called the baby; but when her mistress sent her out with him after breakfast, Sir Nathanael suggested to her, as a matter of course, that she would like to go into the hay-field. After that, she was often there, watching the files of men and maidens with forks and rakes, and in her heart half-envying them their pleasant work. And before Hay Harvest was over, her turn came. One Saturday morning George's experienced eye detected signs of a change of weather, and all hands were summoned to make a crowning effort to get the last load of hay carried before night.

The house was all but deserted, nobody being left at home but the cook and Lady Wroce's dignified and confidential attendant Mrs. Martha; and more from a kind wish that the girl should see the fun than from

any real need of her services, Sir Nathanael asked his daughter-in-law if "that maid of hers" would not bear a hand with the rest, Martha being willing to take charge of the baby in her absence.

Lydia was only half-pleased, for shyness seized her, and also a little fear that "field-work" might not be quite proper; but some one hastened to lend her a white cotton sun-bonnet, with a deep cape, and showed her how to cock it up on end so as to shade her face as the rest did, and Young George himself put a rake into her hand, and taught her how to hold it; much to the annoyance of James Davis, who was close at hand, just prepared to do the very same thing. Young George, however, had for once condescended to observe that Lydia was decidedly pleasant to look at; worth looking at, in fact, without any reference to the baby. He took care to allot her a place amongst the more civilized of the workers, and remarked to himself that she looked like a "good sort o' maid," a little too fine and "Lunnon-like," perhaps, but it was no fault of hers that she had been born in London.

Lydia, shy at first, soon yielded to the charm of novelty, and, catching the excitement around her, worked as eagerly as anybody. Though not actually pretty, she looked very attractive, with her flushed cheeks and sparkling brown eyes, and other people thought so besides Young George. James Davis in particular was constantly at her side, and George did not fail to notice that although Lydia was more dignified than any other woman in the field, and

"kept herself to herself," as the saying is, in a manner that elicited his highest approval, yet the attentions of James Davis were evidently not unpleasant to her.

Young George gave a dissatisfied grunt, and growled something under his breath that sounded like "not half good enough for her." Lydia had joined the party in the afternoon, and at five o'clock tea was sent out from the house, and there was a halt, which George took care should not be a very long one, under the biggest elm-tree, and a pic-nic meal—altogether a new and delightful experience to the young Londoner. Then to work again, with a better will than ever, until the sun set amidst angry-looking clouds, and a further supply of food in the shape of bread and cheese was sent out, for George has set his heart on finishing the hay, if they have to work till midnight!

By-and-by the moon rises and shines fitfully in a shifting, stormy sky. The night begins to grow dark, and the women being no longer of any use retire into the house. But Lydia waits at an open window to hear the last waggon go creaking to the "barton," as the yard in which the ricks are ranged is called, and listens to the men shouting and singing in a way which would have been shocking to her quiet mind at any other time, but seems quite natural in the excitement of the moment. The hour is half-past eleven, and they have finished their work just in time to avoid trespassing on Sunday morning, and to have the last load of hay safe under the tarpaulin covering

of the rick before the storm that George predicted in truth arrives.

They have run a race against the weather, and won it too!

PART III.

"Since what I am to say must be but that
Which contradicts my accusation; and
The testimony on my part no other
But what comes from myself; it shall scarce boot me
To say, 'Not guilty.'"

SHAKESPEARE, *Winter's Tale.*

Lydia was charmed with Wroceston—delighted with a country life. It is true that she soon found that it was not to be all fine weather and hay-making; wet days came in due time, and long monotonous weeks, when the household would pursue its even course with so little variation, so little movement of any sort, that it gave her the fancy of being only half awake. Another drawback to her comfort was, that she could not lose the sensation of being a stranger and a foreigner amongst the other servants. All their ways and thoughts were unfamiliar to her; their very dialect sounded uncouth to her ears. Also, she could not help being aware that there was a latent prejudice against herself as a Londoner, and that they thought some of her fashions and opinions as odd as she did theirs. But still she liked her situation; she was perfectly satisfied with her lot. She had been too cruelly tossed about to chafe at the quiet dulness of

her present life. To her it was a peaceful haven of rest, after many a long month of storms and sorrows.

But it was otherwise with her fellow-servant, James Davis. He was a soldier who had been invalided home, and had been selected by Colonel Wroce for his wife's attendant, partly because he had been an officer's servant and had a great character for clever usefulness, partly because he happened to be a Wroceston man, and as such, the Colonel thought, more likely to be acceptable to his father than a complete stranger, in case it should be desirable to retain him as an additional man-servant at Wroceston Hall, after Mrs. Wroce's arrival there.

This Sir Nathanael was very glad to do, for, like most of the other servants of his household, old Simon, the butler, was very elderly and incompetent, and even a single additional person to be waited on rendered the help of another servant absolutely necessary, especially as Sir Nathanael made various small alterations in his domestic arrangements to do honour to his daughter-in-law, which threw a little more work than formerly upon Simon's shoulders.

Young George rather shook his head over it. "Those Davises," he reminded his master, "was always a slippery lot;" but the convenience of the plan was so obvious, that it was adopted almost as a matter of course. James Davis amalgamated with the rest of the household much more readily than Lydia did; he was tall and rather good-looking, and endowed with a good deal of self-assertion, so that he became quite a personage amongst them. His stories of India and the

absent Colonel were worthy of Baron Münchausen, and he contrived to lead a very easy life, for his place was really a light one; whilst a few pathetic allusions to his health seldom failed to procure him a substitute whenever any particular piece of work was distasteful to him.

But before he had been six weeks at Wroceston, its stillness and retirement became intolerable to him. He began to confide his dissatisfaction to Lydia when he walked with her on alternate Sunday afternoons; for he and Lydia paired off together almost from the first—rather more, however, from the force of circumstances than from deliberate choice on either side. They had arrived together, and everybody seemed to take it for granted that they would "keep company," as they accordingly did. He considered Lydia a little crotchety and particular, but still quite the nicest girl within his reach; and she, on her side, was flattered by his attentions, and not liking any one else better, took pleasure in his society.

She listened to his grumbling, but did not sympathise at all with his grievances; on the contrary, she tried to reconcile him to his place, and "make him know when he was well off." But in this she was as unsuccessful as he was in persuading her to share his discontent. He was always looking back with longing regret to the few days he had spent in London, and at last he secretly came to a determination, that he would only endure life at Wroceston for a few months longer; that is, until the spring of the following year. It would be a warm, sheltered nook to spend

the winter in—that winter which he dreaded with the dread of a man who has spent some years in a tropical climate; but as soon as the cold weather was over, he would give warning, and travel up to town to try his fortune.

He was the more confirmed in this resolution, because, at about the same time—that is, towards the middle of October—he had a serious quarrel with Lydia, which seemed to him to deprive existence in Wroceston of almost its only compensating charm.

There were some things in which Lydia was very strict, and not a little hard in her judgments. And there was one vice of which she had seen a great deal, especially when she was a friendless lodger in a London alley, for which she would never admit the slightest excuse or palliation. This was the vice of drunkenness. From her earliest childhood she had been brought up to abhor it. Teetotalism had not then been heard of, but her father had been a total abstainer, and had been vehement in his endeavours to get others to be the same. Often and often had Lydia heard him denounce *that* vice as a root of wickedness and ruin, the scourge of his country, the bane of his class; and when she was about sixteen he had much alarmed and awed her by making her take a solemn oath that when he was dead and gone, she would never, knowingly, become the wife of a drunkard.

Now to "take a drop too much" occasionally, was not considered at all an awful crime in the Wroceston

servants' hall. Old Simon did so, not occasionally, but constantly, much to Lydia's disgust; and no one seemed to think it a very dreadful occurrence. But it was many months before Lydia knew that, ready as she always saw James Davis to be for the performance of his duties, with him, too, it was not at all an unfrequent thing to go to bed very far from sober. When first she heard it said, with a laugh that was her special aversion, she shuddered and disbelieved it. And she lived so completely in her mistress's apartments, and her attendance on her little charge separated her so much from the other domestics, that she knew less than any one, except the Wroces themselves, of what really went on in the servants' hall. But such things can never be kept secret for ever, and a day came at last when Lydia happened accidentally to go downstairs after supper, contrary to her usual habit, and in the kitchen met with James Davis, who came unsteadily towards her with rude familiarity and drunken compliments. Lydia stood still for one horrified moment, as though incredulous of her own senses, and then, before he could reach her, turned, totally oblivious of her errand, and fled to her own room.

From that moment she utterly rejected all James Davis's advances. In vain, with some shame and contrition, he endeavoured, the next day, to make it up with her. She listened to his excuses with repelling coldness, informed him frankly that she never wished to have anything more to do with him, and thenceforward never held the slightest intercourse with him,

beyond what their position, as servants in the same household, absolutely demanded.

He was very angry with her, but she paid as little attention to his anger as to his apologies. Many blamed her; all the household thought her too hard on a venial fault. Only Young George was found to say a single word in her favour. Once, when in her absence she was being universally condemned, he silenced and frightened everybody with an emphatic exclamation: "Well, I say the maid were i' the right. I'd rayther see a sister o' mine in her grave than wed to a drunkard. Oh, he don't take but a extry glass now an' then, do he? But how be she to know what'll be the end o' *that?*"

Time went on; and, by-and-by, multitudes of withered leaves rustled under Lydia's tread as she carried baby out for his daily airing. Soon the trees of the avenue stood bare and leafless against the sky; the weather grew colder and colder, and Christmas came.

Lydia hardly knew what Christmas meant, having been brought up amongst strict Dissenters, who did not observe any holy seasons. And although always on her defence against anything that seemed to condemn the teaching of her childhood, she could not help admitting, in the peculiar phraseology into which she always dropped whenever she thought or spoke of religious matters, that the keeping of Christmas was not merely a pleasant, but also, it seemed to her, a "godly custom." There was so much thought for the poor, such a genial desire to give everybody pleasure,

that Lydia was quite touched by it. Wroceston was a place in which special pains were taken to keep up old customs, and the carol-singers went their rounds on Christmas Eve, singing strange old unwritten carols, handed down traditionally, such as "Man, remember Adam's fall," and "Christ was born in Bethlehem, and in a manger laid;" prose hymns, in which the rhythm depended on a peculiar measured repetition of the words. Lydia liked this. It was new and strange to her, and tunes and words were alike uncouth; but, on the whole, it was very pretty. She recognized Young George's bass voice amongst the singers. There he was, keeping all the rest in order, and making the nocturnal expedition a respectable business, which perhaps it might not have been in his absence; and the next morning he actually took the trouble to ask Lydia what she thought of the performance, and to repeat to her some of the words of the carols, which she had quite failed to catch. Not less than these, Lydia liked the sudden peal of bells, which, at the stroke of midnight, burst from the church tower, to usher in the Birthday of the Lord. She willingly went to church the next day, feeling it to be the most right and suitable thing she could do, and somehow liking the service that day better than she had ever been able to do before; admired the Christmas hymn, which was sung to a ringing, easily-learnt tune, in which all the congregation joined; and noticed approvingly the little sprigs of holly, stuck into every seat, making the church look "so cheerful like," she thought. That Christmas

Day was destined to be a rather important one in Lydia's life.

There was a great supper for the servants at seven o'clock, at which she was present to eat her roast beef and plum-pudding with the rest. Besides the household, all the out-of-door servants, and many others, were invited, and there was a considerable gathering, numerous enough to make Lydia feel frightened and shy, and glad that her duties compelled her to return early to the nursery. She was still more glad when she discovered that there was to be dancing after supper; for dancing was an amusement in which her conscience would not allow her to join. She did not think, in her secret heart, that it was really so very wrong and worldly; but her father had sternly condemned it, and for his sake who was dead and gone she could not but abstain from it. She only waited for the passing round of what was called the "wassail bowl," before making her escape. This was a large china bowl, filled with a compound of which the principal ingredient was cider, and which Lydia did not think at all nice. All the quarrels of the preceding twelvemonth were supposed to be drowned therein, and Lydia herself saw Young George and Old Simon, who had not spoken to each other for months, shake hands across it. She was informed that everybody was bound to taste the wassail bowl, who wished to be at all lucky during the coming year, and tasted it accordingly; then, when people were moving from their seats, she watched her opportunity, and made for the door.

Before she reached it, Young George was at her side.

"What, Lydia, not going to stop for the dancin'?"

"No; I've got to go to baby." And then, as he began to press her to return, she looked into his kind, sensible face, and took courage to make a clean breast of it: "Poor father couldn't bear to have me dance. I don't want to for his sake."

Young George looked excessively disappointed. "Well," he said, "I don't blame 'ee for mindin' of your father. But there, 'tis a real pity, it is." And then, as if by a sudden impulse, he followed her out of the room into the passage, and stood straight in her way at the foot of the stairs.

"I made a vow I'd do it Christmas Day," he said, "and I will. Lydia, will 'ee be my wife?"

Lydia turned quite white with confusion and surprise. In the agitation of the moment, she hardly knew what she said.

"Oh, no, no! I can't—I never thought of it—oh! please, don't," she hurriedly exclaimed.

"Don't 'ee be in a hurry," George continued, earnestly. "Do 'ee think of it, Lydia. I be a good bit older than thou be'st, but there ain't a younger man in all the earth as 'll love 'ee better than I. I'll make thee a good husband, Lydia, girl."

But Lydia only thought of getting away.

"Oh! I'm so sorry," she said; "I couldn't, George. Oh! please, don't say any more." And then she slipped her hand, which he was holding, out of his, and ran upstairs.

Mrs. Wroce was sitting by the cradle in the nursery, watching her babe in Lydia's absence. As the girl entered, she looked up, but did not notice her confused and disconcerted manner.

"Oh, Lydia, look here," she said, "isn't this a magnificent present?"

And she held out a large antique diamond ring.

Christmas presents were the fashion at Wroceston Hall, and every servant in the household had received a gift that morning. This ring was Sir Nathanael's present to his daughter-in-law. It was an heirloom, hundreds of years old, and Sir Nathanael told her he had set it aside for her ever since her marriage.

It was a thick silver hoop, bearing an enormous rosette of diamonds, of which the central one was of unusual size and brilliancy, and it was valued at five hundred pounds. All this Mrs. Wroce told Lydia as she sat over the nursery fire.

"But is it not unlucky?" she added. "The ring is so immensely large, you know, I can never wear it without alteration. It would be *too* dreadful to lose it! And yet Sir Nathanael won't hear of my sending it up to London. It must wait for an opportunity, he says. Indeed, I don't believe he quite likes my having it altered at all. So it will have to lie for the present in my jewel-box. Isn't it a pity? Just look."

And she showed Lydia how loose the ring was for her slender finger.

"Then I hope, ma'am, you *will* keep your jewel-box locked," Lydia answered.

And her mistress, leaving the room, laughed in her

usual careless way, and told Lydia not to bother her. The small gold key of the jewel-case hung on her watch-chain, but no amount of reminding from Lydia was sufficient to keep her from forgetting to lock it.

Poor Lydia! she little knew the sorrow that ring was to cause her.

The next day, although she felt a little natural awkwardness at the idea of meeting George, she did not feel in the least disposed to retract her refusal. He was too old, too clumsy, too utterly unlike all she had ever thought of. She was very thankful to find his manner so exactly the same as usual, that she could almost have fancied his words to her yesterday a dream. For herself, she could not help blushing and feeling a little uncomfortable, but she earnestly hoped no one guessed the cause; and, glad to have something to talk about that might divert public attention from herself, she began at once to tell her fellow-servants the history of Mrs. Wroce's ring.

Now Lydia was not at all a cautious girl, and very apt to be rather imprudently unreserved, both with regard to her own affairs and those of her mistress. When she first came to Wroceston she made no secret, as many girls would have done, of the way in which Mrs. Wroce had engaged her, and the fact that she was "without a character" had told not a little against her in the estimation of her fellow-servants ever since. On the present occasion, she chattered freely of the costliness and beauty of Mrs. Wroce's ring; and at last was actually giddy enough to say,

seeing the eager curiosity of her audience: "Why, I could fetch it for you to see: Mrs. Wroce scarce ever locks her jewel-case."

"I wouldn't, if I was you," muttered George.

But his voice was drowned in a chorus of "Oh, do 'ee, then;" and Lydia ran upstairs, found the jewel-case unlocked as she expected, and soon returned with the small scarlet morocco case in her hand, which contained the diamond ring.

It was passed from hand to hand with great interest and excitement, until it so happened that the last person who looked at it was James Davis.

He gave it back to Lydia with a deep sigh of admiration.

"Five hundr'd pounds!" he exclaimed aloud. "That bit o' glass worth five hundr'd pounds! My eyes! What a capital that 'ould be to a man."

"There, take it away, girl," put in Mrs. Martha impatiently; "an' you didn' never ought to ha' brought it down."

Lydia restored the ring to its place in a rather uncomfortable state of mind. She felt that Mrs. Martha was right. She had fully intended to tell Mrs. Wroce afterwards of what she had done, but now a sudden sense came over her that she had taken a great liberty, and committed a great offence. She wished Mrs. Martha had spoken before; but the truth is, Mrs. Martha had been as curious as anybody to see the ring, and had taken care *not* to speak earlier. Lydia felt she should never have courage to tell her mistress what she now felt convinced would

make her very angry; for, soft and gentle as she was in general, Mrs. Wroce could be very angry sometimes. She was not by any means a perfect mistress, and the Wroceston servants had an impression that she treated Lydia with a great want of consideration. In some measure this accusation was a true one, for Mrs. Wroce was very thoughtless in many things; but Lydia loved her dearly, and would not for a moment hear anything said against her. Indeed, it had been to combat this very accusation that she had impetuously and imprudently proclaimed her mistress's first kindness to herself in the matter of engaging her without a character.

Another cause of uneasiness was the recollection which came to her just too late, that there had been for some time past a good deal of reason to suspect that there was some dishonest person in the household. Some small sums of money and some articles of no great value had been missed from time to time; and although there had been some little stir about it, no discovery likely to lead to the detection of the thief had been made. Was this a state of things in which to go and proclaim that a jewel worth five hundred pounds was lying about in an open box? Lydia was miserable. She knew she could never depend on Mrs. Wroce's locking her jewel-case. What, then, could she do? The only thing she could think of was to take the case itself and lock it up in a drawer of which she herself kept the key. She did this, and felt her heart considerably lightened. Nobody, she thought, could now get at the ring.

Just three days after this happened, much to the annoyance of Sir Nathanael, who hated changing servants, James Davis gave warning. He announced that the climate of Wroceston did not suit his health, and he thought he should be better in London.

The evening of the same day Mrs. Wroce's little boy was seized with some childish ailment, and became so ill as to cause serious alarm for his life. He was just old enough to be shy and capricious, and in his illness would allow nobody to touch him but his mother and Lydia, showing a marked preference for the latter, whose tender, careful nursing was, the doctor said, beyond all praise.

It was on the following day, when the child was a little better, but still ailing and fretful, that Lydia was rocking him in her arms on a low seat near the fire, when she was startled by a sudden exclamation from Mrs. Wroce, who had gone into her own adjoining room.

"Lydia!" cried Mrs. Wroce, "Lydia! where is my diamond ring?"

"In your jewel-case, ma'am," she replied, "and that is locked up in the left——"

Mrs. Wroce interrupted her.

"Lydia, it is not! The keys were in the drawer, so I opened it, and took out my jewel-case. I wanted the coral that I kept there for baby. And then I noticed that the ring's case is open, and the ring is not there!"

"Oh, ma'am, do come and hold baby a minute, and let me see," cried Lydia, cold with apprehension.

Mrs. Wroce came, bringing the open jewel-case with her.

"You see," said she.

It was too true; the ring was gone. Lydia controlled herself sufficiently to lay the child gently in her mistress's arms, and then hurried into the next room. She ransacked the drawer; she searched the carpet; presently she came back to her mistress.

"Ma'am," said she, "I may as well say it at once: I fear the ring is stolen."

Mrs. Wroce was looking thoughtfully into the fire.

"Yes, Lydia," she said, "I was afraid so from the first. And, Lydia, I've been thinking—it is a very painful thing to say—but, you know, nobody knew anything about it, or where it was kept, but you. Oh, Lydia, if you have been tempted, and—and—and it has been too much for you, only put it back, and I will forgive you, and, you know, nobody need be told."

"Do you think *that*, ma'am?" asked Lydia, cut to the heart.

Mrs. Wroce looked wistfully at her. "Forgive me if I am unjust," she said; "but, Lydia, you don't know how perplexed I am! What *can* I think?"

"Anything but that, ma'am," answered Lydia mournfully; and then she hid her face in her hands, and both remained silent for a few minutes.

"Well," said Mrs. Wroce at last, "take the baby, Lydia—dear little fellow! he is really better, isn't he?—for I must go to Sir Nathanael. This loss must be known at once."

Lydia lifted a white, tearless face, and looked at

her mistress. Silently she took the child, and silently she watched Mrs. Wroce leave the room. She gave way to no exclamations of alarm or grief when she was left alone; she sat in a sort of trance of dismay and misery, racking her brains to find the slightest clue to the disappearance of the ring, whose loss, she felt, might be her ruin for life.

Presently her mistress returned, and told her Sir Nathanael wished to speak to her, not in the book-room, but, which sounded infinitely more alarming, in his justice-room. She found the old Baronet seated magisterially in his arm-chair, one hand on a volume of Burn's Justice. As she advanced at his bidding tremblingly to the table, he addressed her somewhat as Mrs. Wroce had done, leading up to his accusation against her by a series of questions which elicited that she had had the care of Mrs. Wroce's jewel-case; that she kept it in a locked-up drawer, of which she alone had the key; that the jewel-case itself had a lock and key, but Mrs. Wroce very seldom locked it.

"In fact," concluded Sir Nathanael, "don't you see, Lydia, how useless it is to deny your guilt? Nobody else but you *could* have stolen this ring. You alone knew where it was. Now be advised, my girl; confess what you have done. Nobody is going to be hard upon you."

Lydia did not cry. She only turned whiter and whiter. And at last, in her utmost need, her brave spirit revived within her.

"Sir," said she courageously, "I have *not* stolen the ring. You only waste time in trying to prove that

I have. It would be better to try and find out who it was took the keys and opened the drawer. I know those keys were in my pocket the day baby was taken ill."

Her confident tone made Sir Nathanael hesitate for a moment. Then he shook his head, and replied—

"It is of no use to brazen it out, Lydia."

"I don't attempt to say any more," she went on quietly, "not in my own defence, I don't, because you won't believe me. But one thing I have a right to ask. I should wish my boxes to be searched, sir. They are in the room where baby is now, but he could be taken into my mistress's room, and then, if you will be good enough, sir, I will open everything before you. Lady Wroce and Martha can search the dress I wear, sir, if that would be any satisfaction."

This proposal, which Sir Nathanael himself had intended to make in the form of a threat, took him considerably aback. It sounded so like innocence. And if Lydia were not the thief, who was? And how should he ever recover the ring?

"Well," he said, at last, "I will consider the matter."

"I think it ought to be done at once, sir," interrupted Lydia.

"Very well, then," he said testily, "it shall be done at once. But recollect, Lydia, even though nothing should be found in them, that does not prove you are innocent."

"It is very hard upon me," Lydia said.

"Very hard upon you," repeated Sir Nathanael significantly, "*if you are innocent.*"

Poor Lydia! the tone of hard conviction of her guilt was too much for her, and she burst into a flood of tears.

Nothing was to be discovered in her boxes except —poor girl!—unmistakeable evidence of her poverty. There was a scanty wardrobe arranged with great neatness, but no small personal possessions beyond what were absolutely needful, except a few presents that she had received since her coming to Wroceston. Mrs. Martha, who assisted at the examination, shook her head over it, and thought it was hardly respectable to be so very poor.

Lydia heaved a sigh of relief when it was over. She knew her own innocence, but yet she had not been able to defend herself from a sort of thrill of superstitious terror, lest, by some cruel chance, the ring should, after all, be found amongst her possessions.

I fear it is not going too far to allow that all the Wroceston authorities were disappointed. Sir Nathanael and his wife had taken Martha into their counsels, and she, more from prejudice than from intentional injustice, had given her verdict very positively against Lydia. With this bias in her mind, she related to her master and mistress how Lydia had brought the ring down into the servants' hall, and exhibited it; a clear proof that she did not mind tampering with Mrs. Wroce's jewel-case. She also revealed the shocking fact that Mrs. Wroce had been imprudent and foolish enough to engage Lydia with-

out a character. Accordingly, although nobody quite expected to see the missing ring appear in the boxes that the girl so readily threw open for inspection, there was, nevertheless, a latent hope that they might chance upon some other indication of dishonesty which would identify her with the thief whose presence, Martha now told Lady Wroce, had for some time been suspected in the household, and supply an overwhelming presumption that she was also guilty of the theft of the ring.

When nothing was found, it did not clear Lydia. The inquisitors only became convinced that she was, as Martha expressed it, "a very deep one." And although Lady Wroce declined to search her person, it was in a most chilling tone that she said, "It is not worth while, Lydia; I am convinced by your manner that you have not got it about you."

"After searching all through my things, do you still suspect me, then?" asked Lydia, proudly addressing the whole party, but looking especially towards her own mistress.

Mrs. Wroce's face was grave and sad, and she kept her eyes fixed upon the ground, leaving Sir Nathanael to answer.

"Yes, Lydia, we do. And what is more, we always shall. I don't know whether there is evidence to convict you in a court of justice—that remains to be seen—but there is no doubt in my mind."

"And them things always comes to light some day," said Mrs. Martha; "it 'ould be the best thing for 'ee, it really 'ould, to confess it."

"Is that what you think, ma'am?" Lydia asked, in a very low voice, of Mrs. Wroce.

"How can I help it, Lydia?" replied Mrs. Wroce, lifting her eyes at last, and showing that they were full of tears.

"Then, ma'am," continued Lydia, slowly, "I must give you warning. I know what it is to be turned out of doors without a character—to starve, most likely; but I can't stay here to be suspected—I can't——"

A tearless sob choked her, and she broke off.

"Of course," interposed Sir Nathanael, "you know you can't be allowed to continue here, so your giving warning is a useless piece of impertinence. Come, Eleanor, my dear, I must speak to you. Since kindness fails, we must put this matter into the hands of the police."

"I hope you will, sir. Maybe the police 'll find out the truth."

In another moment Lydia was left alone. The baby was sleeping quietly in the next room under the temporary charge of another servant. The desolate girl dropped on her knees by the rocking-chair, and, hiding her face, wept bitterly.

She had known what it was to be friendless and in despair; she should never survive it a second time, she thought. And then broken prayers, and stifled cries, burst from her, as she remembered how she had vowed never again to lose confidence in God; and she began to supplicate the Almighty Father to right her innocence, and protect her orphanhood.

That prayer gave her courage to go down and face

her fellow-servants, as she had to do at the next meal. It was a terrible ordeal. Hardly any one spoke to her. It was known that she had sat up the night before, and Mrs. Martha, in a voice of hard disapproval, pressed her to eat, and set before her an especial dish that had been cooked expressly for her benefit.

Lydia found it hardly possible to swallow. Nobody said an unnecessary word to her, except Young George, who broke an awful silence by asking her in a cordial voice, "How was the young master?"

"Better," Lydia tried to say; and then she raised her handkerchief to her eyes, and left the room in tears. She could not bear it, she thought; she could not bear it. She must go at once. She must leave the house that very day. She walked impetuously up and down the room. She knelt, dumb with despair, and, as Hezekiah spread out the letter before the Lord, she, without a word, by the very act of kneeling, laid her silent misery at the feet of the All-Merciful. She turned over, with a trembling hand, the leaves of her Bible, searching for a word of guidance.

Was it *accidentally* or *providentially* that the words "Your strength is to sit still" caught her eye?

She seized and appropriated them.

"I will," she said. "I won't take the matter into my own hands. I do commit myself to the Helper of the friendless. Here I stay till I'm turned out, or—till the Lord show my innocence!"

PART IV.

"What your wisdoms could not discover,
These shallow fools have brought to light."
SHAKESPEARE, *Much Ado about Nothing.*

Meanwhile an anxious family council had been held in the library. After a little consideration, Sir Nathanael explained to his wife and daughter-in-law that he did not think there would be the least use in issuing a warrant against Lydia, and sending for the police. He had only talked about it in the vain hope of frightening the girl into confession; but, in reality, although her guilt was plain to all who knew the circumstances, it would be nearly impossible to prove it in a public court. He would ride to Arleigh, and have a private consultation with the superintendent of police, he observed; but he began to fear they should never recover the ring. Nothing remained to them but the useless vengeance of turning Lydia out of the house in disgrace, without a day's delay.

Against this Mrs. Wroce set her face. "Nothing was *proved* against Lydia," she began.

"But, my dear—*proved!*" interposed Lady Wroce, "when it is impossible for anybody to have a doubt! Nobody else had access to your rooms except servants who have been years in the house, whose honesty it would be ridiculous to suspect."

"I don't want to suspect anybody," pleaded Mrs. Wroce, half crying; "but, you know, I *must* think of

baby. Poor little fellow! when he is ill, he can't bear anybody to touch him but Lydia. And, you know, Doctor H. said there never was such a nurse."

"Lor', ma'am, she ain't th' only person as can nurse children," grumbled Martha; adding a hint that "there was a niece of her own——"

"Yes, but baby wouldn't take to a stranger when he is ill, I know," continued Mrs. Wroce. "Don't you think, grandmamma, we might keep Lydia a month? I don't see what we gain by sending her away in such a hurry."

There was a long discussion over this proposal; but at last Sir Nathanael came to the conclusion that there was a great deal of sense in it. The little despot in the nursery was to be thought of, of course. If he screamed at everybody except Lydia when he was ill, why, Lydia must remain until he was well again. And, as Mrs. Wroce said, there could be no harm in keeping the girl so short a time as a month, though it would be manifestly impossible, and "flat immorality," to keep her altogether. Perhaps even good might come of it. How many things might happen in a month! Fresh evidence might come out, or Lydia might be moved to confession. At any rate, she would be under his own eye.

So that evening Mrs. Wroce told her she had obtained permission for her to stay a month longer at Wroceston; and Lydia acquiesced, but not without a struggle with her pride, which her mistress little suspected. Her position in the house was a dreadful one. Almost every one of the servants thought she

ought to have been summarily dismissed, and resented being exposed to the continued society of a thief. Strict orders had been given from Sir Nathanael that nothing was to be said to her on the subject; but these orders were only partially obeyed. And there were besides hundreds of lesser ways of making her feel that she was an outcast amongst them, whilst the accusations against her gathered force from constant repetition, and her character seemed to grow blacker every day.

There was, however, one person in the household who never lost his belief in her innocence; but being a man rather of deeds than of words, he was not able to do much to check the general abuse lavished upon her.

"Well, if it ain't she, who do 'ee think it is?" he was asked. "It must be some un. An' which 'ould 'ee liefer suspect—a woman as never had no character, or folk as have lived respected all their lives?"

"I don't see as it's a bit more like to be Lydia," George answered, doggedly, "than any person else. There's lots of other folk i' the house. Why's *she* to be suspected more 'n Mrs. Martha?—beggin' your pardon, ma'am, an' I don't suspect 'ee no more 'n I do Lydia—or Ann the housemaid, or I myself, or James Davis?"

"If that ain't too bad!" cried the last-named personage, starting to his feet. "How ever should I know anything about the ring—where 'twas, or anything else? My place don't take me into Mrs. Wroce's bedroom."

"Well, then, don't insinivate," pursued George; "I don't mean no offence."

So saying, he left the room, and went to the bottom of the back staircase to intercept Lydia, who he knew would soon come down, shivering and trembling, to join the other servants at dinner.

Presently he saw her coming, with her slow, sorrowful step; and the sight of her pale face and red eyelids went to his kind heart.

"Lydia," he began, "don't 'ee be so downcast."

"Whatever else can I be then," she answered bitterly, stopping and leaning against the doorway, "when everybody in the house thinks I am a thief?"

"Don't 'ee say that, Lydia. It ain't true. *I* don't think thou be'st a thief, my girl. No, nor yet I wouldn', not if the ring was found in thy very pocket to-morrow!"

Lydia looked at him with incredulous, grateful eyes. Then she mournfully said,—

"I don't see how any person can help it."

"Lydia," replied George, gravely, "when I do ask a woman to be my wife one week, I don't let myself down to think her a thief the next. Oh, my maid, I be that sorry for thee!"

Lydia began to cry—the tears lay so very near her eyes now.

"Oh, you are i' the right to pity me," she said; "my character's ruined for life—and I an orphan—with none to take my part."

"Yes, you have, Lydia—yes, you have," George answered, almost crying himself for sympathy. "I

ain't no scholar, but I do think there be a Book—bain't there now, my dear?—which do tell o' One above as do always take the part o' orphans. And, Lydia, let alone that, *I'll* take thy part, my maid, so long as I be a livin' man. So now don't 'ee cry no more, there's a good maid, but tell I all about it!"

Lydia obeyed. She dried her tears, and took pains to reply exactly to the close questions that George now put to her. His shrewd, intelligent face looked thoroughly puzzled as she concluded.

"'Tis a muddle," said he, "a terrible muddle, my girl! But, please God, we'll see daylight through it yet."

It is impossible to say how much this little interview cheered and encouraged Lydia. It was much to find that even one person believed in her innocence. It was more, much more, that that person should be Young George, who was so much looked up to, and of whose cleverness everybody had so high an opinion. Surely if any one on earth could right her, he was the man. And this was he whom she had so hastily and decidedly refused when he asked her to marry him, because, forsooth, he was so unlike a Londoner, so rough, so little of a scholar, so old. Lydia began to ask herself whether any other, let his age be what it might, would have stood by her as this man whom she had refused was standing by her now.

The sense of his support gave her courage to brave her lot with dignity and patience, though for a whole fortnight Young George made no sign.

Then one afternoon, meeting her in the passage, he stopped her, and said, rather sadly,—

"I've done all I can, Lydia, my girl, an' I can't find nothin' out. There ain't but one thing more left as I haven't done. But there be some un as I do suspect, Lydia, though I hain't got a morsel o' proof."

"It's no use," Lydia answered, in a still sadder tone, "you can't do anything—nobody can. But I will never forget your kindness, all the same."

She passed on, and George watched her lilac dress vanish round the corner of the staircase. Then, with a heavy, resolute tread, he went in search of Sir Nathanael.

Now it so happened that there was a dinner-party at Wroceston Hall on the following day; and a dinner-party at Wroceston Hall was an event which happened about twice in a twelvemonth, and was generally supposed to require the concentrated energies of the whole establishment to carry out successfully. Therefore when Young George, with an introductory remark that he wanted to speak to his honour, brought out a request that he might take a holiday on the morrow, and also that he might be allowed to make use of one of the carriage-horses, Sir Nathanael stared at him.

"Well, George! You certainly don't often take a holiday, and I should be sorry to refuse. But—you know as well as I do there's a dinner-party to-morrow."

"Yes, your honour, so there be," was George's reply. "But now James be here, I ain't wanted the forepart o' the day, an' I'll be back early in plenty o' time to

wait. I do want the horse uncommon particular to-morrow, your honour."

"Well then, George—there, you can have it," said his master. "What's up, George? None of your family in trouble, I hope."

"No, sir, my sisters be all very thrivin' so far as I do know. But if they bain't in trouble, there be other folk that be. And I do like justice, your honour, an' not to have the innocent suspected. So I may so well tell 'ee at once I be goin' to the White Witch!"

Now, the White Witch was a personage who pretended to be able to do all sorts of wonderful things: to cure certain diseases, for example; sometimes by spells and charms, which were useless, and sometimes by quack medicines, which were often actually mischievous. She also professed to be able to answer all sorts of questions, and to find remedies for all kinds of difficulties.

Whenever anything was lost, she pretended to be able to tell where it was; and although she would often merely announce, in a solemn manner, "You will never see it again," still these oracular answers were not considered unsatisfactory, and certainly did not deter people from applying to her.

Very great was the ignorance and superstition prevailing amongst the rural population of England in the days of which we write, and they were peculiarly ready to be taken in by this sort of imposture. Almost every large district had its White Witch, driving a considerable trade amongst those who were too simple to detect the foolishness of her pretensions; and many

were the hard-earned shillings and half-crowns that passed out of the hands of poor labouring men and women into her capacious pockets.

Such a person was Betty Bidwell, the White Witch at Arleigh, to whom Young George had made up his mind to go, to put the important question—What had become of Mrs. Wroce's diamond ring?

"Why, what in the world can the White Witch know about it?" asked the Squire, from his superior standing-ground as an educated man.

"Well, your honour, that's neither here nor there; but I be going to ask her."

"Why, I thought you had more sense, George."

"Well, your honour, I reckon I ain't more foolish than others; but don't 'ee see, your honour, I've a-got my way o' thinkin', an' you've a-got yourn."

"It's sad stuff, George, running after witches. Why! how *can* any old woman——"

"Well, your honour, that's the gentry's way o' lookin' at it, that is. I be a plain man, an' I do go by what I do see, and I do think there's a deal in it."

George was in one of his dogged moods, and argument was merely thrown away upon him. At last Sir Nathanael, treating the matter as a good joke, gave him the required permission to use the horse, only stipulating that he was to be told what the Witch said.

So George rode solemnly away to Arleigh, taking care to let all the household, except Lydia, know why he was gone. To Lydia he said nothing. For Lydia not only did not believe in witches, but she

also entertained a strong doubt of the lawfulness of encouraging their imposture by having any dealings with them. George knew very well that she would disapprove, even if she were too much out of spirits to ridicule, his expedition. She was a free-spoken, ready-witted girl, and he had often heard her give her opinion very plainly on such subjects; sometimes turning the superstitions current amongst the ignorant population of the village into such irresistible fun, as to raise a laugh even from the most credulous; sometimes gravely condemning what seemed to her not merely absurd, but pernicious nonsense.

Young George was more than half of the same way of thinking, but it is not easy altogether to outgrow the notions with which the imagination has been saturated in childhood. In the moment of difficulty, the consultation of the White Witch was a resource that naturally suggested itself to him.

Do not despise him too much, O well-taught and right-minded reader! You—with your schools and lending-libraries, your lectures and your reading-rooms—can scarcely realize in any degree the absence of educational advantages, in the midst of which Young George and his contemporaries grew up.

It was an age when, with some bright exceptions, there was a great deal of deep-rooted indifference and neglect abroad, not only in secular, but, alas! also in religious matters. Minds were left vacant, souls uncared for, and—except here and there—"no man laid it to heart." George Herbert's quaint apostrophe—"O England, full of sin, but *most of sloth!*"—was

sadly true in those days. It was written on the face of the country in sufficiently legible characters; but though there were not wanting some to read and interpret them, few gave any heed to what they said. It was written in the ignorance, either brutal or stolid, in which the labouring population was steeped; in churches falling into ruin, or else unsightly and disfigured; in selfish mismanagement of ancient trusts; in parishes where priest and people seemed alike to have fallen into a deep sleep; in vague but widespread discontent; in the hoarse, half-stifled murmur of voices calling for reform. What a change, what an awakening, has taken place since those days! Go to any aged people you may know, and hear what *they* have to say of the contrast between *now* and *then*—between their own childhood and the childhood of their grandchildren and great-grandchildren. Almost always they end by telling you that if people could only know how things *used* to be, they would be more thankful than they are for present advantages.

Then, it was a rare exception to find a labouring man who was able to tell his letters; *now*, the National School is, after the Church, almost always the most prominent feature in every village in England. And if there are any children who do not learn how to read and write, it is simply their own fault, or the fault of their parents. *Then*, it was not very wonderful that even sensible people should believe in White Witches and a hundred other absurdities; *now*, all these superstitions have died out of their own accord, and have become mere nursery tales and old wives'

fables; except, perhaps, in a few remote corners, where the ignorance, which was their native soil, yet lingers.

But as to Young George, I have already hinted that he did not himself receive the current stories of the mysterious power and cleverness of the White Witch with unlimited credulity.

His motives for going, as it were in state, to consult her, were twofold; but he kept them to himself, and merely announced his intention with his usual brevity of speech.

We, however, may be permitted to know what he did not trouble himself to reveal to his fellow-servants. In the first place, then, he hoped to work upon the nerves, and through the nerves upon the conscience, of the person who was really guilty of the theft of the ring. There was one person in the house whom he strongly suspected, and he was exceedingly anxious to devise some test that might throw him off his guard, and lead him, *if guilty*, to betray himself.

Now, the person whom George suspected was Mrs. Wroce's man-servant, James Davis. He suspected him, in the first place, because, in a general way, he altogether disliked and distrusted him, and considered him to be what he expressively called a "crooked sort o' chap" in all his ways. Perhaps it was this primary want of confidence that put it into his head to observe James Davis carefully, from the very day on which the loss of the ring was first discovered; and in the course of this careful observation he had noted several things. He had noted that James

Davis, who was generally tolerably easy-going and good-tempered, seemed to have suddenly become irritable and morose, and was constantly taking offence at the merest trifles. He had noted, too, that he was evidently in a great hurry to get away from Wroceston, for he was quite angry at a suggestion from one of his fellow-servants, that he might as well offer to stay on till Sir Nathanael was suited. He had also noted a certain latent uneasiness in his manner whenever the subject of the lost ring was mentioned, and fancied that he detected a secret eagerness to change the conversation, coupled with a painful uncertainty whether to venture to speak or to be silent. Moreover, when George hazarded a proposal that the servants should all offer to submit their possessions to a thorough search, James Davis was loud and eager, and yet, it seemed to George, visibly embarrassed, in his indignation.

But all this, taken either together or separately, did not amount to the slightest proof of guilt; George was determined to obtain something more decisive, either one way or the other. He was no schemer, however, by nature; and the only thing he could think of was the somewhat clumsy expedient of riding off, in the most public and open way possible, to consult the White Witch. George felt convinced that, although James Davis thought himself a very fine fellow, and had travelled to all sorts of wonderful places, he had by no means emancipated himself from the narrow notions of his boyhood, which had been spent in one of the roughest and most ignorant

families in the village. It is true that he seldom went to church, and openly scoffed at religion as a thing only fit for women and children; but George instinctively felt, although he could not have put his feeling into words, that lack of faith is no warrant for the absence of superstition, but rather the reverse. And if anything in the world was calculated to revive the power of the terrors and the credulities imbibed in childhood, it was the possession of a guilty conscience.

Young George's second motive for his expedition to Arleigh was a real curiosity on his own part to hear what the White Witch would say. As far as her supposed mysterious powers were concerned, he would have said then, as indeed he did say, to Lydia, some time afterwards, that he did not "hold wi' no such nonsense." But he had a great idea of her cleverness ('cuteness, he called it), and in this he was not altogether mistaken. I need not tell my readers that most of the wonderful pretensions of the White Witch at Arleigh were the merest imposture, but at the same time she did really happen to be an extremely clever woman. She was quite a proficient in the art of putting this and that together, and often made shrewd guesses, that filled her ignorant clients with wonder.

But this time the Witch's *'cuteness* was quite at fault. No secret had been made of the loss of the diamond ring, and she had heard all about it; and had jumped, like everybody else, to the conclusion that Lydia, and nobody but Lydia, had abstracted it.

She checked Young George, when, with heavy

earnestness, he began to lay the matter before her, and told him she knew all about it; and although, in the course of their interview, she cleverly extracted his private suspicions of the guilt of another person, this did not shake her conviction that Lydia was the thief; for she easily detected George's partiality for the girl, and considered that his evident anxiety to see her proved innocent blinded him to the overwhelming nature of the case against her.

In a general way, it was Betty Bidwell's rule always to endeavour to give the answers that her customers desired to receive; but, in the present instance, she felt so convinced of Lydia's guilt that she thought it would be sacrificing her own reputation for skill and foresight to give the kind of reply that she knew very well George wished for. So she shook her head gravely at him, and said, in a half-compassionate tone:—

"It's no use deceivin' of 'ee, George Grenvil; 'tis a She as done it."

"It ain't, then!" cried George, angrily.

"Ah, 'tis, though! Mark my words—they Londoners ain't to be trusted."

"Londoners ain't got nothin' to do wi' it."

"Well, you'll see! I tell 'ee 'tis a She as done it; an' if I ain't mistook, which I bain't not often, my words'll be proved true, an' it'll all be found out afore mornin'."

If George had been as credulous as some of his neighbours, if Betty Bidwell's words had overthrown his trust in Lydia, if the girl had thus been deprived

of her only remaining friend, she would not have been by any means the first innocent person that Betty Bidwell, and others of her stamp, have ruined by their mischievous trade; for mischievous indeed, and not merely absurd, must a trade be which relies for success either on shrewd guesses or audacious falsehoods. But George's trust in the girl he loved was far stronger than his faith in Betty Bidwell. Her insinuations simply made him furiously angry.

"You be a mischievous old 'ooman!" said he, indignantly, "an' don't know nothin' at all about it. I were a downright fool to come to such as thee."

And turning on his heel, he left her, returned to the inn where he had left his horse, and rode slowly homewards, much discomfited at the result of his adventure.

"A false, deceivin' jade," he muttered to himself. "Lydia were right. I didn' never ought to have had no dealin's wi' any such. An' now, whatever be I to say to 'em at home?"

And with a heavy heart he thought how near the time was when Lydia must leave Wroceston—how soon, too, James Davis would pass out of reach! "What was to be done?" he asked himself, very disconsolately indeed.

All at once, like the sudden entrance of light into a dark room, a bright idea struck him.

What, he once more asked himself, had been his purpose in visiting Betty Bidwell? Was it not less to obtain any new information than to procure the means of "givin' a start" to James Davis, with a view

to working on his sense of guilt, and clearing the innocent? Well, then, he had the required test in his possession. He had only to suppress the first half of Betty Bidwell's sentence, and boldly try the effect of the second, namely, the words, "It 'll all be found out afore mornin'." There was some risk, certainly. It might "turn out wrong," just as his expedition to Arleigh had done. But George had an utter faith that Heaven was *for* the innocent, and *against* the guilty, and would favour any attempt to clear the one and convict the other.

That evening, as Sir Nathanael was sitting at the head of his dinner-table, the sight of Young George handing round vegetables recalled the morning's conversation, and, suddenly turning round to speak to him, he asked—

"Well, George, what does the White Witch say?"

"Says it 'll all be found out afore mornin', your honour," answered George, promptly, and with great distinctness.

"Oh, she does, does she? Well, we shall see," answered the Baronet.—"You clumsy fellow! you are letting the wine run over on the table-cloth. Do look at what you are doing!"

These last words were addressed to James Davis, who hurried away to fetch a napkin, with a muttered apology for his awkwardness.

The little incident seemed to have made him wonderfully nervous. He kept making strange mistakes in waiting; his hand shook visibly; and, in fact, he appeared to have completely lost his head.

The first course was removed. Young George, standing beside his master, was pouring out a glass of beer, and, as he did so, repeated to him, in a quiet, casual manner—

"Yes, your honour, it 'll all be found out afore mornin', she do say."

At that very moment James Davis was putting a dish of game upon the table. His face was white and anxious, and the unsteadiness of his hand attracted everybody's attention; and as George composedly uttered the above words, he gave such a sudden start that the dish he held slipped from his grasp, and fell on the table with a great crash.

Several glasses were broken, several ladies' dresses spotted with gravy, and a good deal of confusion ensued. In the midst of this, James Davis, trembling in every limb, rather tottered than ran out of the room, closely followed by Young George.

"Spare me, spare me!" he cried with chattering teeth, falling on his knees in the hall. "I took the ring—I confess it—I haven't sold it—I'll give it back—only don't let me be sent to gaol."

Yes, it was he who had stolen the ring. But the inquiry had followed so close upon the theft that he had not dared to make any attempt to dispose of it. He was reserving it for the future, when he should have left Wroceston for London.

George had not been wrong in his calculations as to the effect of an alarm on James Davis's conscience. Ever since his theft he had lived in perpetual fear of discovery. He had long been aware of George's

suspicions, and was tortured with uncertainty as to the extent of his discoveries. The old superstitions of his childhood haunted him with thrills of intense alarm at George's expedition to visit Betty Bidwell; and when he heard him composedly repeat that all would be found out before morning, he was seized with a conviction that the truth, or almost all the truth, was known, and that his only chance for mercy lay in anticipating detection by confession.

Young George, vowing he did not care if 'twas twenty times a dinner-party, summoned Sir Nathanael out of the dining-room; and, amidst tears and sobs, prayers for pardon, and professions of contrition, a full relation of his guilt was elicited from the wretched man.

Lydia's unlucky exhibition of the ring in the servants' hall, and the remarks that had accidentally dropped from her to the effect that it was worth 500*l.*; that Mrs. Wroce would not be likely to wear it until it had been made smaller to fit her finger; and that the case in which it was kept was generally left open, had excited his cupidity, and suggested the easiness with which it might be gratified.

The first time he paid a secret visit to Mrs. Wroce's room, the jewel-case, which he knew by sight, was nowhere to be seen; but he discovered that one drawer in the wardrobe was locked.

His next step was to pick Lydia's pocket of the key, which he accomplished without much difficulty. Then, on the very day the little boy was taken ill, he once more entered the room, opened the drawer, found the jewel-case, and abstracted the ring!

But James Davis had not nerve enough to make a great criminal. Having done the deed, he was so overpowered with guilty terror as to be unable to take the necessary pains to obliterate all traces of his presence. He left the jewel-case in disorder, and the bunch of keys in the drawer; and it was that very circumstance which attracted Mrs. Wroce's notice, and led to the discovery of the theft.

In abject terror—for those were days in which thieves were sometimes condemned to the penalty of death—James Davis stammered forth this confession, and implored Sir Nathanael's mercy. And he received it. The Baronet was overjoyed to recover the ring, and took into consideration that, after all, it would have been very difficult to do so if the real criminal had not himself owned his guilt. Also, he did not like to punish a man for what he might for ever have remained ignorant of but for his own confession. So James Davis got off, much to the indignation of Young George, whose private opinion it was that hanging would have been too good for such a rogue. Sir Nathanael paid him his wages; and he left Wroceston the next morning, never to return, without troubling himself to say good-bye to any of his relations—who, it must be allowed, however, were certainly what Young George called them, a "slippery lot."

There was a great sensation in the servants' hall at the extraordinary success of Betty Bidwell's prediction, and there was danger that the result would be an increased disposition to put faith in her preten-

sions; until, at supper, George entertained the assembled household with a full account of his expedition to Arleigh, and his interview with the White Witch. Then public opinion veered round, and all the credit and admiration was transferred to George himself, for the clever use he had made of her mischievous words. The stranger servants belonging to the dinner-guests were present, and so the story circulated in the neighbourhood; and very angry and provoked was the old woman, at the ridicule with which she was assailed in consequence. One practical lesson is worth a dozen lectures. "Law, to be sure, look at that now!" everybody cried, when George, in few but forcible words, pointed out how cruelly hard on the innocent Lydia was such pretended knowledge as Betty Bidwell's; and when he emphatically concluded with a strong expression of his opinion that White Witches and their arts were "rubbishin' humbug, the whole lot of 'em," nobody disagreed with him, and his words made a deep impression on many, even of the most ignorant and superstitious of his hearers: all the more because George was a great man in Wroceston, and what he said carried weight. But the veritable history, which nobody could contradict, of the way in which he had turned the White Witch's weapons against herself, and used her own prediction to prove her an impostor, made a deeper impression, and went further still.

All the Wroceston household were exceedingly contrite for their treatment of Lydia, and extremely anxious to do all in their power to make up for it;

and, by common consent, the treat of telling her that her innocence was established was left to the one man who had never believed her guilty—Young George.

Her thankful delight at finding herself freed from the painful weight of suspicion may be imagined; and yet, even whilst the grateful tears were still in her eyes, and grateful words on her lips, she could not help, timidly, and with some hesitation, hinting her disapproval of George's visit to Betty Bidwell. "Though it *does* seem taking too much upon me to say aught about it," she concluded, "when you've been so extremely kind."

"Not a bit of it," said George, bluntly; "I do like 'ee better for speakin' out thy mind. An', Lydia—I be most come round to thy way o' thinkin'—I do believe all they tales folk do tell, 'bout witches an suchlike, is a pack o' lies an' nonsense, an' nothin' else."

"That's what dear father used to say," said Lydia, thoughtfully; "an' I don't think townfolk hold so much with such things as village-folk do; they laugh at 'em mostly. Father never laughed, though. He used to take everything so serious, father did."

"Townfolk is oftentimes very 'cute," said George; "they do get more learnin' than us do. I 'ouldn' like to ha' been bred up in a town, Lydia; I like country-work, *I* do. But I'd be fain enough to be a better scholar, if so be it had pleased God."

Lydia made no immediate answer, but she looked up and smiled; and there was something in her smile

that went straight to his heart, and filled him with a sudden conviction that she, for whose sake chiefly he wished himself a better scholar, liked him right well just as he was. George had not intended to take advantage of that grateful moment to renew his suit to Lydia, but that smile was too much for his resolution. He took her hand, and held it for a moment in a slow embarrassed way, without speaking. He was one whose words were always rather slow in coming.

Lydia coloured deeply, but she did not withdraw her hand. Presently, seeing George did not speak, she spoke herself—words that had rushed to her lips, almost at the very instant that she heard how her innocence had been established; but a feeling of reserve, and uncertainty whether she should meet with sympathy, had checked them until now:—

"Oh, George, it seems so wonderful to me, how the Lord overrules follies—and sins even—and makes 'em work together for good—even to such as me, as more than half distrusted His goodness——"

Lydia's lips quivered, and the tears, repressed till now, flowed down her cheeks.

There is nothing so infectious as real, irrepressible emotion. George's eyes were tearful too, and his voice trembled, as he drew Lydia closer to him, and said, slowly and reverently, "His Name be praised!"

The more he was moved, the fewer words could he find at his command; but Lydia understood that he comprehended her feeling and sympathised with it, as well as if, instead of four words, he had spoken twenty.

What more he said to her, and what she answered, it is not needful for me to say. I only know that that evening Mrs. Wroce, with tearful eyes, earnestly begged Lydia's pardon for having unjustly suspected her; and added that she should write the very next day to tell Martha's niece she need not come, and hoped Lydia would forgive everybody for the unhappiness she had suffered, and remain in her service for many years longer.

"Until," Mrs. Wroce added, "until, dear Lydia, you have a home of your own to go to."

Then Lydia, with deep blushes, made her mistress understand that perhaps that time might not be very far off; so that it would be better, on the whole, not to act hastily in the matter of putting off Martha's niece.

"For George, ma'am," said Lydia, her face all one crimson flush, "don't want to wait longer than he can help—only I wouldn't like to inconvenience you, ma'am."

How all these details were arranged, I cannot delay you with describing: I will only relate that, within about six weeks from the day of which I am speaking, George and Lydia were married. There were all sorts of gay doings at the Hall in honour of their wedding; for not only was George a valued servant of the Wroce family, but one and all seemed to hail the occasion as a special opportunity for making up to Lydia for past wrongs and unkindness.

As to Lydia, she bore malice against nobody; and all the Wroceston people, from Sir Nathanael down-

wards, were delighted with her, and admitted her into their innermost circle of respect and liking, and considered her as quite one of themselves.

Everybody agreed that a happier-looking couple had been seldom seen, notwithstanding the long interval of years between them; and "Young George," in the happiest of homes, and with the sweetest of wives, unlearnt all the unfavourable opinions he had once cherished in disparagement of womankind—opinions acquired in the days when he was jilted by his first love.

For the benefit of those who always want to know what becomes of everybody, I will add that Martha's niece turned out to be a very satisfactory servant; and that Mrs. Wroce's baby survived his first twelvemonth, and grew up a bright, healthy lad. In due time the Colonel returned home from India, and, as poor old Sir Nathanael grew older and feebler, all the management of the Wroceston estate passed into his hands; but he and his father had, by this time, outlived their differences. The grandchild was a bond of union, and they all dwelt together in great harmony till the day of the old man's death.

THE END.

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